# *The*

# WIFE DECIDES

A NOVEL

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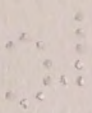
THE WIFE DECIDES



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# THE WIFE DECIDES

## BOOK ONE

## THE SOWING

### I

#### NORA'S ARRIVAL

EDITH MALCOLM was one of the chosen few of the idle rich, who worked at her profession of authorship for sheer love of it. Unlike most people, she religiously believed in cultivating the rare gifts that God had given her.

Her mother died when she was a child, and then she became her father's companion and mainstay. Some two years ago, at his death, he left her sole mistress at 'Gleneyrie,' his magnificent estate on the Hudson.

During a part of her father's life, it was their custom to move into New York for the winter; their summers were spent either at Newport, or else in traveling abroad. But now, all was changed, and Edith found herself enabled to continue her literary work without interruption.

As she re-read the yellow slip, announcing the

arrival of Nora Sherwood, she wondered whether this new element in her life would prevent her from enjoying the same degree of liberty as before.

Miss Malcolm looked at the clock on the mantelpiece, by which she had been standing; then her glance rested momentarily on the cheerful wood fire burning below, idly considering the dancing flames, and realizing how pleasant their warmth was, for the first chill of autumn was in the air.

She had still ten minutes before the dog-cart would arrive, so she leisurely continued her way across the room.

It was lined with shelves, containing books of reference; there was, too, a substantial desk, in picturesque disarray, and though the room was almost monastic in its severity, the one feminine touch disclosed itself in a cheval glass, which one could not help thinking was rather out of place.

As she passed within range of this, she paused instinctively, and critically examined her reflection. The inevitable, mysterious adjustment of her fur toque followed; then, a pulling out and re-settling of hatpins, a deft touch to her veil, a smoothing down of the waistline, and a studied turn which brought a three-quarter view of her trim figure into a better light; all this made her realize that there was something in a French cut after all: which goes

to prove that Miss Malcolm was delightfully feminine and altogether charming, besides being a clever woman of the world and a well-known literary light.

Satisfied with a final survey, she seated herself at her desk, placing the folded telegram under one of the leather corners of the blotter. Putting down her small bag beside her, she gazed abstractedly across the room, her thoughts upon Nora Sherwood. Soon her mind turned to the girl's mother, whose friend she had been through so many years of that unfortunate woman's life.

How well she remembered the day when Esther had come and confessed that she had deceived her husband, how he had found her out, refusing to pardon her, and begging Edith to stand by her!

Esther Sherwood, in bringing her unhappy story to a close, had said that her husband had promised to make her a substantial allowance, provided she left the country forever! Thus dismissed, the wretched wife had no alternative but to leave his house, taking the little girl with her, to which her father made no objection; indeed, he had never shown any love for the child, who had been left entirely to the mercies of governesses up to her twelfth year.

Edith continued to be Esther's friend during the

years that followed, and many letters were received from Mrs. Sherwood from various small continental towns. It was clear that though the unfortunate woman felt her degradation most keenly, her conscience made her realize the necessity of keeping her child in ignorance of the past. This decided her to place the young girl in a convent near Paris, where she remained until her twenty-fourth year. During this period, in desperation, Esther abandoned scenes where the principal events of her wretched life had been passed, only to begin in fresh fields a series of restless, feverish journeyings, trying to forget, until at last death mercifully claimed her.

Mrs. Sherwood's last letter before she died had ended with an appeal to her friend to take under her protection the child whom she insisted must be kept forever from all knowledge of her mother's downfall.

The promise was given, although Edith felt morally certain that it would entail a sacrifice on her part, and now, with the orphaned daughter coming to make her home with Edith, she was seized with a sudden qualm of apprehension, which increased in intensity as the prospect of her new responsibilities drew nearer.

Would she succeed? Would the girl respond? How would it all end?

Just then she heard the wheels of the cart approaching, so she was saved from further speculation. She gave a sigh of relief, for the horse she was to drive, being both young and fresh, would be a tangible battle to wage, instead of an imaginary encounter.

A few minutes later, she was bowling along under the leafy bower formed by the interlacing of the buttonwood trees which outlined the driveway.

Long before she reached the station, some three miles distant, she had brought the sturdy, young animal down to a more subdued gait, and smiled, drawing a long breath, partly of enjoyment, and partly of relief, for she was unaccustomed to defeat, and—it had been hard work, this time.

Shortly afterward, she was walking along the platform, awaiting the arrival of the train, her horse being held by the young son of the station-master. She had just time to nod a smiling greeting to him, when the whistle sounded, and the train came in.

She scanned the faces of the descending passengers, and presently saw the figure of Miss Sherwood coming toward her. Before she had time to ask herself why Nora was in grey, instead of the conventional black, the girl was by her side, and yielding to the impulse of the moment, she stepped

forward. Taking her in her arms, she warmly kissed her.

"I have not seen you for eight years—" she said, and then, abruptly; "tea will be ready for us—we had best hurry!"

The break in her sentence was not due to her anxiety for her usual cup of tea, but to an enigmatical expression, which she had surprised in the other's eyes, and which, for once, she could not fathom.

## II

### OVER THE TEACUPS

An half hour later, the two women were seated in the drawing-room, furtively studying each other across a well-appointed tea-table, but it was Nora who first lowered her eyes, her half smile going no further than the muscles at the corners of her mouth.

Miss Malcolm, realizing that she had been gazing rather too directly at her friend, began to speak in her usual pleasant conversational tone.

"I must confess, my dear," she remarked, as if pursuing the tag end of some unspoken thought; "I hardly knew when to expect you—"

"Why not?" asked the other, opening her eyes a trifle wider than usual; "Didn't you get my telegram? I asked Cynthia to be sure to send it!"

"Oh, yes!" answered Edith quickly; "but I meant —after your mother's death."

"I understand," exclaimed Nora; "but—I must tell you why I am not in mourning—I saw you noticed it—"

"Yes, Nora, I did, but naturally I didn't think it would be in good taste—"

"To speak of it? Well—perhaps not," mused Nora; "though I don't suppose you understand. My training—the foreign view—it's all so different, you see—"

"But—after only eight months—" began Edith helplessly, and somewhat confusedly.

"Yes, I know," interposed the younger woman, with a touch of impatience; "but how could I be expected to feel the death of a—person I hardly knew?"

"Oh, my dear! You could have shown the conventional amount of respect!" suggested Edith gently.

"Would that necessarily follow in this case?" was the unexpected rejoinder, and then, as if she felt she had created a false impression; "I really knew her so very—slightly, when all is said and done. Besides," she ended laconically; "you wouldn't wish me to act a lie, would you?"

"Of course not!" answered Edith mechanically, and was silent.

She was beginning to grasp the difficulties of the trust she had undertaken, and recognized that there were to be no easy limitations.

She watched her friend who had risen, and crossed the room. She reflected deeply, as a graceful, willowy figure outlined itself against the long,

French window leading out to the red-tiled terrace.

What would she not do for poor Esther's child! Surely it should be easy to transfer to the daughter the loyalty she had once given the mother!

At present there was a wide gulf which must be bridged before she and this young girl could meet on some common ground.

Nora opened the window, and stepped out on the terrace, where she walked slowly up and down, stopping from time to time to admire the green slopes of velvety lawn that stretched down to the fringe of woods below. Edith, as she caught fragmentary glimpses of her, wondered what was really in the girl's mind.

She looked up brightly, as Nora re-entered the room.

"I have found you out, my friend. I took a peep at your workshop."

"Yes, I write," said Edith, smiling at the trite expression; "what do you think of it?"

"It struck me as a room that was intended purely for work—the room of a woman who was in earnest!"

"Yes, but—have you ever tried to write?"

"Only a few trifles—they are hardly worth mentioning—scraps I dashed off in the convent, but of course, one is so limited when every line—every

word—has to be read by a sister. You see, I was frightfully repressed in my ideas, because I didn't dare to say what I really felt."

"Of course, but—I should like to see some of your work, that is—if you have no objection."

"Thank you so much, but I'm afraid you'll find my efforts ridiculously crude; besides, one's life—in the world—must be so very different—I've had such a limited experience, but—I imagine it's more—unconventional—"

"It is totally unlike the life you have lived in the convent; however," Edith added, "one has to adjust one's standard to altered conditions."

"Oh, yes!" agreed the younger woman glibly, but Edith saw that she failed to grasp her meaning.

"I know how hard it is—to understand—" continued Miss Malcolm hesitatingly.

Nora detected an altogether different significance in the subtle modulation of her friend's voice, and was quick to take advantage of it.

"I see," she urged; "I really do!" But Edith recognized the lack of absolute conviction in her companion's inflection, and sighed gently.

The entrance of a servant to remove the tea-tray was a welcome interruption, and made Miss Malcolm realize that a rather prolonged silence had

followed the ending of their somewhat fragmentary conversation.

"You mentioned Cynthia a few minutes ago," she said; "who is she?"

"She was a friend of the Mother Superior," answered Nora; "and we took a fancy to each other. She asked me to travel with her, and she acted as my chaperone on the steamer coming over."

"I'm glad you managed so well," smiled Edith, but went on; "My house was open to you at any time you wished to come, as I wrote you, but—I gave very little attention to the actual details of your journey home, I'm afraid."

"I didn't give much thought to that either. You see, I've been accustomed to look after myself—"

"I see, but—who is Cynthia?" repeated Edith; "you haven't told me yet."

"She is a Mrs. Reynolds Wayne—she is about five years older than I am, and she comes from somewhere near Philadelphia. That's all I can tell you about her, except that I like her."

"That always seems to me half the battle," mused Edith; "I am glad," she continued more earnestly; "that you were able to find a friend like Mrs. Wayne—it made your return to your native country more intimate—more of a real home-coming!"

Miss Sherwood, instead of replying at once, laughed lightly, remarking that that aspect of the case had never struck her before.

"I loved the few months traveling we had together so much," she said; "in fact, it was delightful to go about with her—she was so charming—so well-informed,—so different from, well—my mother, for instance."

Miss Malcolm glanced sharply at her friend.

"It is pleasant to find a congenial friend," she said dryly; "especially for an ocean voyage."

"I didn't see much of Cynthia—she was sea-sick most of the way," answered Nora smiling in her peculiar fashion.

"That was a pity, wasn't it, for you must have been lonely—unless you were sick too."

"No, I wasn't—and I managed—to have a very good time." This time Miss Malcolm was not mistaken. There was something in the girl's tone that clearly indicated a mystery, and a palpable attempt at concealment. Was the girl as open as she had at first seemed, or could there be anything which would have to be discovered—ferreted out?

"Yes," she replied tentatively, feeling the necessity of proceeding cautiously.

"I make friends easily, you see—I have the gift of being able to gauge a person the minute I meet

him," continued Miss Sherwood; "it's a very convenient thing to be able to do."

"Unless one makes a mistake. Then, I think it would be apt to be disastrous."

"Oh, what an idea! That would be too awful!" exclaimed Nora with a light laugh, and a pretended shudder.

"It might be well to remember that you are not infallible," remarked Edith, and they both laughed; "But it's hardly necessary to remind you of that."

"It's very good of you to tell me my faults!" murmured the other sighing gently; "but, by the way, I had almost forgotten—I expect—a man to come to see me—about tea-time—to-morrow. Have you any objection?"

"Not at all! I wish you to feel at home here, and to invite any one you want," answered Edith, rising. "Who is he?"

Nora Sherwood rose too, and faced her friend.

"It's Leslie Griswold!" she said, her eyes refusing to meet Edith's; "do you know him?"

"Yes! I know all about him—" answered Miss Malcolm; "but—what is this man to you? He is—"

"Oh! I know all about him too," announced Nora; "because, I'm—engaged to him—that's all!"

She tossed her head, and laughed, but Edith gazed at her in horrified astonishment.

## III

### THE TRUTH FROM LESLIE

"I HAVE a story to tell you!" said Leslie abruptly.

"Yes—go on!" answered Nora; "what is it?"

The two were sitting side by side on a bench in the grounds of 'Gleneyrie,' the next afternoon.

"It's about a woman," continued Leslie gravely; "and the causes which brought about her illness."

"What was her name?"

"Her name—Lucy!" replied Leslie quietly; "and I am telling you her story, because you must know it. Will you listen to me—will you hear me out—until the end?"

"Why, yes! But I don't understand—"

"You will understand all when I have finished." And Nora wondered why his voice quavered slightly.

"She was married at the age of twenty-two to a man a few years her senior," continued Griswold steadily. "She had been ill—very ill when her child was born—and the child died after only a week's

illness. The woman's miraculous recovery surprised even the doctor, but the shock was too much for her, and—she has been helplessly insane—until recently—very recently.

"Sometimes she has been calmer, at others subject to violent attacks, and then it has been necessary to keep her forcibly under restraint until the fearful paroxysms were over.

"During the past year she has seemed to get worse, her fits of insanity have increased in intensity, and her health has become more and more precarious. The nurses had been told by the doctors that the unfortunate woman would never be better, and finally they decided that the last struggle was not far off, when the end would come in coma and—death."

Leslie's voice sank to a minor key, but presently straightening himself by an effort, he continued his narrative.

"One day a sudden and unexpected movement on the part of the patient caused the nurse on duty, Miss Hill, to rise and move toward the bed. She bent over and saw that the woman's eyelids were quivering, and that her long, lean fingers were picking feverishly at the bed-quilt. She turned away to press the electric button at the side of the mantelpiece, this being the signal agreed upon when the

nurse in attendance considered her patient at the point of dissolution."

"Why are you telling me this story?" broke in Nora, her voice trembling.

"Be patient, dear!" answered Leslie gently; "and let me go on—I must tell you all!"

"How oddly you say that!" murmured Nora solemnly.

"The eyes of the woman were now open, for the nurse had hastened back to the bedside, the weak voice of her patient having made her retrace her steps. She noticed that the expression of the eyes was calm, and that the usual glitter had gone. She could not understand it. What could have happened? Was this the clearing of the tired brain before death claimed its own, or what could it be?"

"Who was this woman, Leslie?"

"I shall tell you—in a few minutes. I want to end my story—before—I forget it. She called to the nurse, and said that she wished to say something to her. The nurse, who saw that her patient was absolutely normal, was only too anxious to listen, so drawing up a chair, seated herself by the bedside. From what Miss Hill told me, the conversation between them ran in this way. Lucy began to speak, and told the nurse that she had been very ill—for years perhaps, but that now she was

better. She continued to say that her mind had been clouded, that she had been violent—when she had wanted to hurt some one—she couldn't remember who, but—that she had been crazy to kill him. Now all was changed. She confessed that she had loved her husband, but that she had felt there was a difference in his love for her from what she felt for him. After a spasm of pain, the poor woman went on to say, that after her baby was born, she had been very ill, and that when she recovered, she learned of the child's death. That was the beginning of it all, for after that, she couldn't remember clearly, but now, the sense of unreality was gone, and she knew that she was getting better. She was weak, at least the body was, but her mind was clear. It was then that she requested the nurse to send for the doctors."

"And—what was their verdict?" asked Nora, hardly conscious that she had spoken aloud.

"That she would recover absolutely—unless something totally unforeseen should occur!"

Nora was silent. Presently she looked up into Leslie's troubled eyes.

"Who was this woman, dear?"

"God forgive me! She was—she is my—wife!"

As the voice of the man ceased speaking, Nora suddenly seemed unconscious of the lovely walks

through which they had strolled during the afternoon, of the statuary at various points, of the flowers and shrubs, of the soft, springy turf, and the song of birds; everything had faded from her mind, save the fact that she was standing alone, for surely the man must have been removed, torn away from her, for now the two were as far apart as the poles.

As if from a great distance, a voice made itself heard, which still could force her to listen to its pleading.

"You see how it is, my darling!" it murmured appealingly; "when the poor soul returned from the dark shadows to what was worse than death—I did what I could—I saw that she received proper care—I could do no more. As time passed my life grew into a condition of routine—the details of my wife's illness interested me less and less, until I felt that my marriage had never been—that I was actually free—free to love again—to begin my life anew—to make a fresh start. It was then that I met you. Ah! try to understand and—forgive! Before I sailed for home, I heard on the highest authority that my poor wife's days were numbered, indeed, I honestly believed I should hear that she was dead when I arrived in New York. Then it was that I spoke to you—then that you listened

AS IF FROM A GREAT DISTANCE A VOICE MADE ITSELF HEARD.

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and—answered. This is the truth, as God is my Judge—or else I could not have said to you all that I did—from the fulness of my heart! You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, I understand!" but the answering tone was so soulless that the man turned to his companion, as if to speak. The hopeless misery in the girl's eyes stopped him, though the words were trembling for utterance on his white lips.

He had loved her but he had never realized how much, and until now, he had never guessed how much she loved him. He knew what it cost him to give her up, and the pain that was hers! It was cruel—unbearable!

Nora rose slowly and painfully, leaning against the bench for support, one arm stretched along its back, the other hanging like a dead weight at her side.

"I said I understood, and—I do understand!"

Leslie listened almost without breathing, for he knew that he was about to hear what was final.

"I cannot blame you, and—I forgive you—from my heart. What else could you have done? The fault was not yours. It was ordained that this should happen—long before we both were born."

The girl's voice had grown strained and weary, but she went bravely on.

"You must listen to me—you must not interrupt. Be merciful, and let me finish what I have to say! You never loved your wife, but—you did what you could for her—your duty. You are a good man!"

The woman seemed overwhelmed by a sudden tenderness, but choked it in its inception, and continued to speak a trifle more harshly.

"You did your duty once—you must do it again! You must go back to your wife! You must give her that—tenderness which is—her due—to make up for the long period of darkness—to bring back to her—the happiness that was once—hers!"

Nora's voice was all at once tinged with a touch of impatience.

"You must never let her know that you do not love her. It is your bounden duty—it is her right to have your love! I entreat you to do this—for my sake! Henceforth, dearest Leslie, we can be but memories—each to the other. Go! I can't endure any more!"

She spoke in a whisper, and as her voice ceased, her head sank slowly, until it rested on her breast.

Griswold sprang to his feet, his hands clenched tightly at his side. For one lingering moment he gazed at the woman he loved but had lost; then he turned and walked swiftly away, not daring to look back, for fear his courage should fail him.

For a space the girl did not move, then she staggered forward, as if she felt there must be something still left undone—unfinished. She paused, until with a quick movement, she sank to her knees, burying her face in her outstretched arms, and broke into unrestrained weeping.

# IV

## NORA PERPLEXES EDITH

EDITH was forced to confess that she was completely at sea in her estimate of Nora Sherwood's character. First, because there had been a lack of spontaneity in the girl herself, and again, because of the frivolous touch Nora had given to the announcement of her engagement.

Edith had not had an opportunity of making further observations, for the day after, Nora had been busy superintending the unpacking of her trunks, and had given Edith the impression she wished to be alone in the afternoon.

Miss Malcolm respected Nora's wish for solitude, and was so occupied with her literary work, that she came in late for tea. She saw that two of the cups had been used, and lifting the teapot, discovered that it was almost empty. She rang the bell.

When the servant brought the fresh tea, she told Edith that the young lady was somewhere about the grounds. Miss Malcolm thanked the maid, and finished her tea.

She walked out on the terrace, looking in the

direction of the woods, but thinking that Nora might still wish to be undisturbed, returned to her study to finish her work.

Later on she was informed by her maid that Miss Sherwood had a headache, and had gone to bed. She sent her love to Miss Malcolm, and hoped to join her in the evening if she felt up to the exertion of getting up. There was nothing to worry about—she was only tired from the long journey, and rest and quiet were all she needed.

On the afternoon of the second day, Nora not yet having made an appearance, Edith determined to investigate. She sent word that she would like to see her, but Nora's maid who met her at the door told Edith that her mistress wished to rest a little while longer—that she felt better, and would come downstairs after dinner.

When Edith had finished her coffee, she picked up a book to occupy herself while waiting for Nora, glanced over it, but being unable to fix her attention on it, tossed it aside impatiently. She got up and began to pace the room. She felt annoyed without having any definite cause for such an unusual emotion, except a rather vague sense that she was being baffled.

Had Nora really been ill, or was there any other reason for her absence?

She had said she would come down after dinner; it was after dinner, long after dinner now, and yet she did not come. What could be the matter? She was determined to find out.

She rang the bell, but thought it might be a mistake to send a message by a servant. It might give rise to needless gossip, so she changed her mind, and bade the maid remove the tray. She waited until she had left the room before she made any further move. Then she crossed the room, and stood by the fire-place, her back to the door, and one slippered foot resting lightly on the bar of the fire-guard. Surely the coast was clear now!

A rustling of silk made her turn. She caught a glimpse of her friend's figure standing in the doorway, holding on the curtain. She saw that the girl was pale, and that her attitude was stiff and unnatural.

Something was amiss. A change had taken place, and—after Leslie Griswold's visit! Had he told her the truth, and had she been made ill by it, or had Griswold merely been amusing himself with Nora, and had she found him out? Which was it?

Nora came forward. Edith took her hand, and without a word led her to a chair by the fire.

Miss Malcolm returned to her former place by the mantel-piece, and pillowing her chin in her hand,

gazed thoughtfully down into the bed of glowing embers.

Then she glanced timidly at Nora, but the girl's lifeless expression troubled her, so she looked away again, and patiently waited for her to speak.

Presently the girl raised her head, and began to speak, quickly, feverishly, as if she feared to be interrupted.

"I have had a shock!" she said, twisting a ring aimlessly about on her finger; "and I think it would comfort me to tell you about it."

She glanced up earnestly, but with a certain air of diffidence, as she pressed her lips convulsively together, but as she read assent in her friend's eye, lowered her own, and continued to speak.

"I told you the other day of my engagement—and since then, I have learned the truth, but—it was not Leslie's fault—it was not his fault. I feel certain you have known about his—wife—but what will be news to you is, that she has suddenly recovered her reason—"

"What!" exclaimed Edith, for the moment stirred from her usual serenity; "Is it really true?"

"Yes, and the doctors consider it a most miraculous cure."

"And—he came to tell you about it."

"Yes, he came to tell me about it. You have no

idea what it cost him to say it, for he loved me very dearly—and I admired his courage more than I can express."

"You love him—still?" asked Edith finally; "I am very sorry for you, dear! You have had your first bitter experience in life;" she murmured softly. "If there is anything I could do to lessen your grief, God knows I would do it!"

"I thought I might rely upon you—I mean, I hoped you would have something to—suggest!"

"What do you mean, my dear Nora? I am afraid I scarcely understand—"

"Why—just this!" broke in the other impetuously, meeting her friend's eyes for the first time; "I hoped you could—help me to—forget."

"Do you think anyone could do that?" inquired Edith, noticing a momentary return of the Sphinx-like expression which had puzzled her at their first meeting; "I'm afraid that would be an impossibility—unless you are deceiving yourself. But—if you are sincere—I might be able to help you—to take you—out of yourself."

"What do you mean by saying, 'if you are sincere'?"

Edith evaded giving a direct answer, for she was unprepared to cavil or argue the question at present. She preferred to sum up her impressions rather

than to run the risk of committing a fatal error of judgment by going ahead too quickly.

Here was a girl of apparent simplicity. This had been the first impression, until the question of Nora's mother intruded itself. Then it was that she had weighed critically the girl's character to see whether the delicate scales had shifted their position. For the moment she had come to the conclusion there was no appreciable change.

The next step was to consider what effect her convent training had had on an evidently susceptible nature. One thing was clear: such a life had taught the girl to differentiate, to analyze her individual sensations, and therefore to bring them into too great prominence. It was a dangerous process!

Now a new phase had been added, which needed further and careful consideration.

"I must confess I don't understand your point of view," she said, recognizing a subtle change in the girl; "and I think you do me an injustice when you put me in the position of appearing to doubt the truth of your assertions! Have you any reason for doing so?"

"No!" answered Nora enigmatically; "but I can only say that I am sorry. You are making it hard for me too—you are putting me in a false position

—when—I am really throwing myself on your mercy!"

Edith could not help smiling, for Nora had suddenly revealed herself as both feminine and delightfully unsophisticated, for only a very young woman could have made such a speech.

"My dear Nora!" she ventured; "I think that is unworthy of you. You are reversing the tables with a vengeance. I shall forget most of the things you have said, except that you have asked for my help. Now, in what way, may I be of service to you?"

"I am glad you are willing to overlook my nasty show of temper—it is really very noble of you to do so. Why—my one thought was—that—this would be a good time—I mean would you feel like looking over some of my work, and you could tell me if you think I could ever succeed in—literature?"

"I shall be very glad to do so," answered Edith, and she wondered whether the girl's request was sincere.

"That is settled then," interjected Nora; "of course, I don't want to interfere with your own work, but what hour could you give me tomorrow?"

"After tea, if that will suit you."

"You have been very kind, Edith!" said Nora, "and you have really succeeded in changing my point of view already, which is all I can expect for the present."

"Good-night!" echoed Edith, and smiled.

As Nora turned and crossed the room, Miss Malcolm noticed that the girl's carriage had regained its elasticity. She admitted that there was a certain peculiar grace about the young girl which gave her an alluring, most seductive charm.

As she considered this, she reluctantly made up her mind that this element was more purely physical than subtle, and then she sighed.

But—she thought, until Nora is conscious of this dangerous power, there was nothing to fear. It would be Edith's task to keep her in ignorance of it.

# V

## A VISIT IS MADE

Eliot Gordon was a genial elderly gentleman of the old school.

Because of a great interest in gardening which they had enjoyed in common for a number of years, Edith had endeared herself to the old man, and often drove over to interchange ideas with him on this mutually fascinating pursuit.

Her knowledge of the artistic side being finer than his, he found her advice invaluable, as he knew more about purely material questions involved, such as in the present case, the preparing of beds for actual planting.

He was smoking a pipe reflectively, his eyes roving from the bed he had just finished raking to the box of assorted bulbs and back again. If she were only here now to help him decide!

A young man in golfing costume approached the outer edge of another bed nearby, but Mr. Gordon had his back turned, and he did not hear him, for his footsteps were noiseless on the lawn.

A low laugh made the elder man look around

impatiently. When he saw that it was his nephew, he resumed his work without any comment, for that mocking sound jarred on his nerves. He knelt again by the box of bulbs, puffing furiously, as he did so.

"How much do you pay for those bulbs?" inquired Bradford Hoyt, his expression changing from amusement to one of shrewdness.

Eliot Gordon told him, but did not look in his nephew's direction.

"I shouldn't think it would pay," was the dry comment; "it seems to me a very poor investment!"

"I can quite understand that, but can't you ever consider anything except from the point of view of cold cash?"

"No. When I buy a thing, I don't pay any more for it than I can help, and when I sell anything, I get all I can out of the other fellow."

"Yes, that's your way, I know!" rejoined Gordon, as he held up and examined an early Peony bulb; "and yet—you know as much if not more about business than anyone I ever knew!"

"Considering I have practically devoted my life to it, it doesn't seem strange that I should have learned a thing or two, and—it's not often that I get fooled."

"I'd be willing to bet there isn't a man who could

do that," said his uncle as he looked about for his trowel.

As a matter of fact he was proud of his nephew's keen business acumen, but true to his principles, he added: "There does seem to be another side to the question—don't you think so?"

"Enjoyment and art, I suppose? Yes, I don't deny that," agreed Hoyt; "only I haven't had time to think about any nonsense of that kind. Those things don't pay!"

"Perhaps not! But—that's the very reason I chose you as my man of business; and, that reminds me—what were you able to do about those steel shares?"

"I was just going to tell you about them. Well, I got them all right, and I put them away in your box—"

"Good enough!" exclaimed his uncle; "you're a wonder!"

"Am I? You'd have to say so, if you'd seen the stroke of business I pulled off about fifteen minutes later!" said Bradford, with a self-satisfied smile. "You see, I sold those shares to Billy Truesdale, who was buying for Bacon's account. He tried to make out that I had withdrawn my offer, but I held him to the bargain, though he wriggled and squirmed a good deal. I was just in time, for the

next minute, one of the brokers for the Colgate group jumped into the game, and brought up the price to within one fifth of your price limit. The best of the joke was that I cleared five thousand dollars on the transaction!"

Eliot Gordon looked up and laughed heartily.

"And was it perfectly fair?"

"Yes, but what do you mean to insinuate?"

"Nothing—only I was admiring your matchless nerve!"

Bradford, taking this as a compliment, laughed loudly, and Eliot Gordon, though he considered his nephew's business methods rather questionable at times, after a short pause, laughed too.

"I carry these things through," continued the younger man smoothly; "because I flatter myself I know human nature pretty well, and—I know when—to bluff. I'm not saying that if he'd had the nerve to call me down I wouldn't have ducked; but I knew old Bill's mind didn't work quickly enough for that."

"One day, my boy," remarked Gordon blandly; "you'll bark up the wrong tree, and you'll be sorry. It's never a good thing to dally too near the danger mark!"

"I'm not hunting any trouble—I don't think—not!"

Gordon, having planted his row, looked up sharply at his nephew who smiled back carelessly at him, so giving him up as a bad job, the old man got up and after fumbling for his matches, relit his pipe.

"It must be almost tea-time," he said, and glanced at his watch; "your aunt will be on the look-out for us, and—I know she doesn't like us to be late."

And both men laughed.

"Well, shall we be moving on?" asked Gordon.

"Yes, why not?" answered Hoyt, still laughing.

On their arrival they found Mrs. Gordon placidly knitting beside the tea-table on the west verandah.

"Here you are!" she called out, greeting them with a bright smile; "I was afraid the tea would get too strong—"

"Not for me, aunt Myra," insisted Bradford; "it couldn't be too strong for me—"

"No, my dear, I know that. I was thinking of your uncle—he is so very—particular!"

Her husband opened his mouth to speak, but had no opportunity to defend himself at this moment, for just then the butler entered, and announced the names of two ladies:

"Miss Malcolm and Miss Sherwood!" And he held the French window open for the two ladies to pass out.

Mr. Gordon rose, and coming forward, extended both hands to Edith.

"My dear!" he began effusively; "I'm afraid I'm in trouble again. I must talk matters over with you, or else I shall never close my eyes to-night!"

"I'm always ready!" laughed Edith gayly, and the old man joined in her merriment, for Miss Malcolm possessed the rare power of radiating happiness to such an extent that Gordon reflected that happiness in spite of himself.

Then Edith brought Nora forward.

"This is my friend, Nora Sherwood—I have been so anxious for her to know you!"

Edith was unconsciously appealing to her friends to take the younger woman under their protection.

She must have realized that by doing this, she was confessing doubt as to the course she had pursued in managing Nora's case; and trying to reassure herself that she had acted for the best.

She presented the girl to Mrs. Gordon, but noticed with considerable dismay the repression with which Nora greeted her hostess.

Mr. Gordon handed cups of tea to the two ladies, but Bradford Hoyt seemed absorbed, and unconscious that any especial duty was required of him, so it was Edith who helped Nora to bread and butter.

Mrs. Gordon looked across at Nora with considerable curiosity, but did not attempt to draw her into the conversation; instead she preferred to study her at leisure.

Edith and Mr. Gordon were talking apart, Nora was drinking her tea slowly, and looking over the rim of her cup as she did so; while Bradford, who had been conversing with his aunt, having finished his tea, lit a cigarette.

Mrs. Gordon noticed from time to time that he was furtively watching Miss Sherwood, not however as if she were a creature of flesh and blood, but from purely an impersonal standpoint.

She felt as if a play was being enacted before her eyes, for Myra Gordon, with all her apparent simplicity, did not often miss a trick, though she kept the knowledge gained to herself.

"How do you occupy your time, my dear?" she inquired, remembering her duty as hostess.

"My days are very much alike," answered the young girl demurely, as Mrs. Gordon thought; "I am trying to follow in Edith's footsteps, you know!"

"You are ambitious then to become a writer?"

"To become a writer? Yes, I am—but, of course—any success one may have spurs one on to further efforts—but—you don't understand—how could

you? I forgot where I was for a moment—I beg your pardon!"

"Not at all!" said Mrs. Gordon politely, and then added: "it must be interesting and absorbing—work of that kind."

"Oh, it is!" answered Nora. And turning her head slightly, she intercepted Bradford's absorbed and earnest glance fixed upon her.

She would find out what he was trying to do, but at this moment she was prevented from doing so by Mr. Gordon who rose to put down his cup on the table, and who then addressed her.

Edith was relieved to catch a note of banter, as Nora responded to the lightness in Mr. Gordon's tone; for the time being it made the girl seem more human and natural.

"Come on!" cried Gordon turning to Miss Malcolm; "come into the garden—"

" 'For the bat-black night has flown' "—quoted Edith mischievously; "but I'd have hated like poison to have been Maude!"

"Stop that!" playfully admonished Gordon over his shoulder, for he had walked on ahead, and Edith, with a light laugh, followed.

In the meantime Nora listened politely to Mrs. Gordon who was telling her about the early history of New York, appearing to give her undivided at-

tention to what the old lady was saying, but she managed at the same time to keep half an eye on Hoyt who still remained silent beside her.

The old lady's voice droned on, and as the subject of her discourse needed little or no comment, Nora found her attention wavering more than once.

Hoyt was beginning to interest her as a subject for "copy." And she laughed inwardly as the word came to her mind.

As for the man in question, his interest in the girl was absolutely incomprehensible, for he was not a lady's man. He had been attracted when she entered by some indefinable something about her.

Could it be in the graceful undulation of her walk, or what was it?

He could not find any answer to these questions, and for the first time in his life, he was confused.

# VI

## NORA THINKS IT OVER

HOYT was a shrewd, conservative business man. That he was confronted by something different from any business proposition made him realize that for once he felt uncertain of himself. He had no doubt as to his love being real, but he did not seem to realize its intensity.

He intended to call on Miss Sherwood to ask her to become his wife, yet he felt himself a poor lover. Still his courage was high and his heart was beating strongly in anticipation of the great happiness he knew would be his if she accepted him.

He had met a woman with whom he had fallen in love at first sight, but he had never paid serious attention to women, and so he felt awkward and ill at ease at a time when he should have been more confident of himself than ever before.

He had known and admired many women, but never before had he experienced the stirring of that passion that is stronger than death, than life, or the mystery of both.

As he made his way to "Gleneyrie," he was posi-

tively elated, but as he waited for the door to be opened, even then he had no idea of the reality and strength of his love for Nora.

It was not until he had been admitted, shown into the drawing-room, and the portieres had been pushed aside by Nora herself that he knew beyond all possibility of doubt that he loved this woman, and this woman only, with his whole heart, mind and soul.

He could not speak, and he stood there, awkward and silent, silent as he had been on the first day they had met.

He only knew that he was in love, but for once in his life he was mortally afraid. He feared that he was not loved in return, and he was terrified to put the momentous question that should decide his fate.

There was the joy; there was the pain. The wonder of it!

Nora was looking at Bradford with amused eyes, for she being a woman had known the truth from the first.

She asked him to sit down.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" she asked finally; "since we met—"

"Since we first met!" breathed Bradford? But he spoke with the voice of his soul, for no sound passed his lips; he could utter no word yet.

"It seems a long while ago!" she ended, as she continued to study him. "I have been so busy myself since then."

"I suppose you are still writing!" he said, as if he could not understand why she loved such work; "now I am taking my holiday, if you choose to call it that."

"What do you do?" she asked curiously.

"I am a broker," he answered; "but even when I am on my vacation, I am thinking out problems—"

"I suppose it must be very absorbing—very—interesting—" she said, hardly aware that she was echoing Mrs. Gordon's sentiments, even her very words, in regard to this man's occupation, words that had previously been applied to her own profession.

"Very!" he replied, as he thought, dryly, but she easily read the deep enthusiasm in his tone, and smiled again.

Could love be really as blind as people thought it was? Would this man's love make her artistic life possible? She desired to be free to live that life, to work out her fate, to follow out her chosen career, with a sense of being untrammeled, in a more sympathetic center than at present. Would it be possible to do this to her complete satisfaction, if she became this man's wife?

She must wait and see, for it would never do to make a fatal mistake at the very start of her career. It would be unbearable—commonplace—stupid!

His conversation fairly bristled with financial terms; but one thing stood out clear, and that was, this man had already made one fortune, and if she could believe him, stood in a fair way to make another and a larger one.

She would not have been human, if this talk about money had not had its effect upon her, so she listened eagerly, greedily, drinking in with avidity all he said, for he had opened up a new world before her eyes, and one that fascinated.

After a time the subject began to pall; it lost its first charm of novelty, and to the woman the sting of her suffering returned with full force. Once more she felt the strength of her passion stemmed and halted, and she lived over again the terrible moment when Griswold had told her his story.

Hoyt ceased speaking, and Nora waited for him to continue. As he did not do so at once, she had an opportunity of making up her mind what her reply should be.

She carefully weighed the advantages and the disadvantages, contrasting one with the other, and estimating their value. She was doing with the possibilities of her life just what Bradford had done

with his, the point of view alone being shifted. That would make very little difference in this case, for the result would be as before, the making of a mutually profitable investment.

The advantages would be a comfortable home, a man who could supply her with money, and a place where she could work undisturbed. The principal disadvantage was the giving of herself to a man she could not love. Would one balance the other?

Bradford Hoyt looked up suddenly.

"Dear Miss Sherwood—Nora!" he said, with that confident smile which was so characteristic of him; "I love you!"

"Yes!" she responded quickly.

"But you've known about this—" he insisted looking fixedly at her; "you must have known it!"

"How should I?"

"Because you are a woman, and a woman always knows! Answer me now!" he pleaded breathlessly; "you will marry me, won't you?"

For the fraction of a second the woman hesitated, and then she met his eyes, firmly and without flinching.

"I'll think about it!" she replied, with her slow smile.

# VII

## A SECOND MEETING

EDITH was very much impressed by the determination with which Nora applied herself to her work. It could mean either the enthusiasm of the novice, or a real and lasting interest.

The girl was going the right way about it, and showed that she understood the value of method. All this tended to convince Edith that she was in earnest.

She was giving Nora all the aid she could; the sort of help one bestows willingly on a fellow-worker who is in love with her art.

She had noticed a reserve in the girl's manner, which might be due to absorption and the effects of concentration, but there was a certain quality of cynicism in Nora that she did not like, for it seemed unnatural and out of place in a girl of Miss Sherwood's apparently healthy mental make-up.

Her conclusion brought her to the question that she could not answer: was the girl working under a strain, or was she trying to get away from herself?

It would be much easier if she could only look into her mind, but that, of course, was impossible.

The girl had become a woman, and had developed in the last week, an extraordinary degree of composure. It was this that puzzled Edith, for it made her think that Nora was on the point of doing something she might regret later. Edith was always suspicious of changes in manner.

If Nora was deceiving herself, there was no danger that she would make no progress, and then, she would be like a creature adrift. But Edith felt herself powerless to interfere. It made her position so much more difficult, because there was nothing she could say or do.

For many reasons, Miss Malcolm feared to speak out, but principally because she was unwilling to expose herself to the possibility of a rebuff. Nora had too much natural reserve to make an approach easy.

Edith could only look on this trait as unfortunate, for she was herself more sympathetic and more accessible.

Being a woman of the world, as well as a past master in the portrayal of character, she felt certain that she could deal successfully with the situation.

At the same time, she was aware that the girl would have to work out her own salvation, what-

ever she, Edith, might do to the contrary; but one thing she was firm about, and that was, she would not permit her own work to suffer because of the possible vagaries of another.

The fear that this might happen had made the pleasure she had expected to derive from Miss Sherwood's visit more problematic. For this reason she was quite decided that it was essential where they were similar.

She did not deny that it would be much more satisfactory for them, if they could have it out, for it would end these futile mental skirmishes; it was not that Edith lacked the moral courage to bring matters to an issue, it was rather that she had the tact to refrain. To act hastily would clearly defeat her original object, and must be avoided, if she were to fulfill the promise made to her dead friend.

At this moment Nora came in with an open letter in her hand.

"This is from Cynthia Wayne!" she said, holding it out toward Edith, though she smiled quizzically; "what do you think I had better do about it?"

Edith read the letter carefully and slowly; then she looked up inquiringly at Nora who had moved away to the window where she was standing aimlessly drumming on the pane.

Miss Malcolm tried to make out why the girl had

asked her advice about the invitation, for it was from Mrs. Wayne asking Nora to spend a few days at her place near Philadelphia; but her expression gave no information, it was absolutely non-committal.

The girl was of age, and could do as she chose in regard to such a simple matter! It was not a situation that called for either advice or permission, while Nora, feeling that she was a guest of the house, was going through the rather elaborate form of asking permission from its mistress, or else, recognizing a certain amount of authority on Edith's part, was asking for her opinion, as from an older woman.

There was something about the girl's manner and actions that seemed too subtle to be altogether natural, and Edith had a feeling that the whole thing was too well done to savor of absolute sincerity; so she contented herself by admitting that Alice gave the impression of being rather deceitful.

"I think it's lovely of Mrs. Wayne to ask you to make her a visit," she said finally, looking down at her hands, and feeling somewhat hypocritical in voicing sentiments so much at variance with her actual thoughts.

"You think I had better—I mean, that I—might go?" inquired Nora, as she turned and walked to-

ward Edith, though she stopped to fasten her cuff on the way, thus avoiding a direct glance at her.

"I should do as I wished," remarked the older woman slowly; "for after all the invitation is to you—not to me. I have absolutely nothing to do with it." She smiled and handed back the letter without further comment.

"I shall go then!" And she folded the letter carefully, and with a certain amount of deliberation. "I had better go pack and send a telegram," she added, and turning, left the room.

Two hours later, Edith bade good-bye to her friend, who departed literally, "bag and baggage." Before leaving she explained why she was doing this.

"I feel that it is wiser to take all my ammunition—all my war-paint and feathers—" she said, with her characteristic smile, "for Cynthia might ask me to stay over a few days longer—you wouldn't mind much if I did, would you?"

"Why of course not!" answered Edith in a different tone, for she was anxious to make amends for her former coldness and suspicion. "I should stay as long as you are wanted—but don't outstay your welcome though. That would be a mistake!"

"Oh, no!" laughed Nora, as she embraced Edith with more warmth than usual. "You have been

so good—so kind to me! Much more than I deserve. I shall miss you—horribly!"

She sprang into the waiting carriage, and closed the door quickly; the maid had gone ahead with the luggage, the coachman whipped up his horses, and moved briskly off.

The railroad journey was tedious, but finally she arrived at the station where her new hostess lived.

There she was met by Mr. Wayne in a smart motor, and before she knew it, she was whisked away along a country lane.

When they had finished their tea, Cynthia showed her to her room, a charming apartment furnished in English chintz, and after telling Nora that some people were coming for dinner, left the rather bewildered girl to rest.

A few minutes before the hour, Nora entered the drawing-room. She hesitated for a moment, when she saw that some of the guests had already arrived. Her host came to her rescue and shook hands, which gave the girl an opportunity to recover her composure.

"My dear!" called out Cynthia gayly, "don't bother about Reynolds, but come over here to me! I want you to know Mrs. Kenneth Macaulay. Sheeda, you must be nice to my friend Nora Sherwood—there! Now you know each other."

Sheeda looked critically at Nora, before she extended her hand in greeting, but as the eyes of the two women met, a sudden flash of understanding passed between them, and all at once, they mutually recognized the existence of some intangible bond; so they smiled, in mutual understanding.

Mrs. Wayne who had turned aside to exchange a word with Druce McAllister, and had consequently missed this by-play between the two women, now presented him to Nora. Then she walked across the room and rang the bell for dinner.

"I won't wait any longer—it's past eight now," she said; "it makes young men think too much of themselves, if you pay too much attention to them; it's a mistake!"

She threw a mischievous glance at Druce, as the butler drew aside the dining-room curtains, and announced dinner.

At this moment a young man entered the room. He moved in a leisurely manner, and greeted his hostess with perfect composure, but made no excuse for his lateness.

It was Bradford Hoyt.

# VIII

## AN INFORMAL LUNCHEON

The reason of her visit to Villa Nova had been to renew her friendship with Mrs. Wayne, but, at the back of Nora's mind was a half-formed idea that she would like to have an opportunity of meeting Bradford Hoyt again. Now that she had met him, she seemed as far as ever from the possibility of making up her mind.

That the meeting had taken place without any chance for preparation on her part, had left her rather bewildered. This feeling had been augmented by some indefinite change in the man's attitude toward her.

When he had asked her to marry him, he had come in the character of a suppliant, but, when she had met him at Mrs. Wayne's house, he seemed to carry the air of a conqueror.

Had Nora actually been in love with the man, she would have accepted his devotion without question, but being uncertain of her own feelings, she was forced to think the matter over more carefully.

She admitted finally that she was unable to cope

with such a momentous question unaided. The waters of doubt had, in the beginning, played about her feet, but she had laughed scornfully, for there was no danger in their shoals; but now she was sinking slowly into the deeper waters of uncertainty, and, sooner or later, would be engulfed by them. She must call for aid before it was too late! She must ask advice from some other woman. No sooner thought of than she dismissed the probability of finding such a person. No, she must discover some other solution of the problem!

But, what of Bradford? What did his changed attitude mean?

Nora sat up in bed and clasped her hands about her knees; she must thresh out this matter, for this phase of the question had opened up a new set of emotions. She began to realize that she would not be able to rest, until her mind was swept clear of these everlasting cobwebs. But how was she to set about such an impossible task alone—and, all at once, she realized that she had returned to her original starting-point.

She yearned and prayed to be shown the loop-hole which would shed light on her darkness.

A knock at the door interrupted her meditation; it was her maid, bringing a telephone message from Mrs. Macaulay, asking if she would lunch with her

to-day, quite informally—there was really no one else coming.

Without a moment's hesitation, she told Anna to accept, and to let Mrs. Wayne know that she would not ride with her after all, but would be lunching out.

Some two or three hours later, Nora, refreshed in mind and body, rang Mrs. Macaulay's door-bell, and was surprised to be admitted by the hostess herself.

"This is to show you," she laughingly explained, "how really informal it is!"

"I am glad of that."

"Yes!" agreed Sheeda, with a charming assumption of innocent levity, "so am I. Do you know," she continued, "I get awfully tired of servants sometimes, so I've sent most of them into town to-day; as a matter of fact, I am going to cook the lunch myself on a chafing-dish!"

"That will be lots of fun!" exclaimed Nora, laughing, for she was much of a child at heart, "but you must let me help—"

"You'll have to, that is, if you expect anything to eat, for—I'm the cook—you must not forget that!"

"If I were the butler—" began Nora, infected by her hostess' mood.

"Which you are not," laughed Mrs. Macaulay; "I know what you are going to say—but, we needn't

go into that—" she remonstrated feebly; "remember, my dear, that you are only the kitchen-maid, and that you don't speak or understand any known language! If you are to be in character, you should be Swedish or German—"

"But how—" ventured Nora in pretended confusion.

"Oh, the real cook will put the food in the pantry, and you will fetch it in to me. If you have any complaint to make, you had best give warning now —it will make it seem so much more natural, if you only would—like the real thing, you know!"

Under the influence of Sheeda's lightness of spirits, Nora forgot, for the moment, the disturbing effects of the past week, and was able to play up easily to her hostess' fine spirits.

After luncheon, after coffee had been served, she turned to Miss Sherwood, with a touch of impulsiveness.

"And now," she said, "we won't be disturbed, so don't you feel like having a good, old-fashioned talk?"

"Yes," agreed Nora hesitatingly, as she looked up at Sheeda with a wistful smile.

"I knew that you had something on your mind when I first met you—I felt it instinctively—"

"Do you mean that I appeared unhappy? Is that

what you mean?" asked Nora, opening her eyes a trifle wider than usual.

Sheeda studied the girl curiously, then glanced away at her own reflection in the mirror of the mantelpiece by which she was standing, and patted into place a refractory curl, before she answered. She was trying to gain time, for she was uncertain whether the girl's question amounted to an admission or not, that she, herself, had guessed correctly.

Intuitively, she felt that no lax methods could succeed with her.

"It's a good deal like having a tooth that ought to be pulled—the longer one delays, the worse it is in the end," she suggested insinuatingly.

"But—I know you so slightly—what could I say?" began Nora in a low tone, which Sheeda noticed vibrated slightly.

"You must try to feel that you may talk to me as if you were talking to yourself—I'm as safe as the tomb."

Nora looked earnestly at her new friend, and after letting her eyes fall for an instant, glanced again timidly at Sheeda.

Presently the girl began to speak slowly, as if she were feeling her way.

"I thought it would be so easy, and it would

be such a relief—ah! If I only dared!" she murmured, and then, "but, I can't, indeed I can't!"

Nora gripped the arm of her chair, and looked into the heart of the fire, as if seeking there the consolation her soul craved.

Sheeda, who saw that the decisive moment had arrived, knew that there was but one way of reaching Nora. She knew, moreover, that such moments come but seldom, and die almost at once, so she must act quickly. Let her once put her fingers on the hidden chord in the girl's nature and force it to respond; then, and then only, would she know she had succeeded.

"Miss Sherwood—Nora!" she added softly, but with an undertone of quiet strength: "you are in trouble—you have admitted it. Don't be afraid, but trust me! I know that I can help you! Won't you let me?"

"Yes!" she said, yielding to the impulse of the moment, as Sheeda felt that she would. "I will." And she looked up at her friend with confidence and trust.

"Before I begin, I want to ask you if you knew my mother?"

"Yes, but—merely as an older woman whose name I was—familiar with, though—I never knew her personally."

"I hoped you had—" said Nora regretfully.

"You forget that she left Baltimore before I came out—you were only a school-girl, then!"

"I see," answered Nora, "and I continued my education in a convent. I was taught repression there, among other things, and that is why I hesitated to speak out. After my mother died, I was happier than I had ever been in my life, for I fell in love and was loved in return. His name was Leslie Griswold!"

Mrs. Macaulay repressed a start, but offered no comment; she knew that story and its sequel too well for that, but she had been ignorant like the rest of the world of Nora's connection with it.

"You were engaged to Leslie Griswold?" she asked at last.

"Yes, but it was broken off."

"Forgive me for asking, but—do you love him still?"

"Don't ask me that! It is a closed chapter. Listen to me! I must tell you the rest of my story. I turned to literature, and Edith helped me with advice. She was more than kind; she was both tactful and sympathetic, but somehow, I don't understand why, there seemed to be a barrier between us, and—I felt as if I were an alien. I don't wish to appear ungrateful, for Edith was my mother's

friend, but—perhaps you see what I mean—what I am trying to say. Yes, you do—I thought you would. If I could call you Sheeda, I—think it would make it easier for me to go on—you will, won't you?"

"Of course—my dear Nora—you may call me Sheeda. It's a pretty name, isn't it?"

"Yes. I soon found out that my writing was not a mere fad, and I see no reason—to change my mind now. You did not know Bradford Hoyt and I had met before that night at Mrs. Wayne's?"

"No, where did you meet him?"

"He was staying with the Gordons. They live near Edith, and are great friends of hers. He is their nephew."

"I see, well—go on!"

"Several days after our first meeting, he came to call, and—asked me to marry him. I told him I would think of it; but I was too much absorbed by my work, and my trouble with Leslie was too recent for me to give a definite answer; besides, I did not know my own mind. You see, it was all so confusing. I could not help thinking that I had been badly treated, but not by Leslie, and I raged at the cruelty that had been meted out to me. What I wish to know is, if I do decide to marry Bradford Hoyt, can I do so without love, and, could I carry

on my work freely—if I were his wife? Would he demand more of my attention than I could afford to give—and, what do you think I had better do? I have promised him an answer to-morrow, and—I am at my wits' ends—I haven't the remotest idea what I'm going to say!"

"My dear Nora! You have got yourself into a mess, but—cheer up, it's only a mental one, so I'll show you the way out. Here's the proposition I had to face when I was just beginning to understand what the limitations and possibilities of life were—we might call that chapter 'on the brink.' Instead of literature, I yearned for worldly position and success. From the first, I made my own conditions with my husband, and those conditions have become part and parcel of the contract—so to speak—I'll tell you about them, directly. Like you, I did not love my husband, but I knew it was my only chance to get what I wanted—I believed that love would follow—it's usually supposed to in marriages of convenience—so I accepted him, for he was rich and studious, and I knew I could turn those very elements to account, if I only played my cards properly. Now, as to the conditions! I asked him if he would agree not to interfere with my worldly ambitions, and I further made it clear to him, that he must trust me unreservedly. I have

amused him in his leisure hours, and he has never had cause to complain."

A merry shout of young voices made Sheeda pause and run to the window; then she called out to Nora.

"Look!" she said, with a new light in her eyes, when the girl stood by her side; "those are my twin girls, and they are the reasons—the principal ones, that have kept me straight—and, I have resisted temptation more than once."

Nora, with no more than a casual glance at the pretty sight, turned away and resumed her seat. Surely, there must be more to follow. Why did not Sheeda go on?

Mrs. Macaulay, after kissing her hand and nodding to the children, turned away and resumed her former position by the fire, but remained silent so long that Nora looked up impatiently.

"What do you advise me to do—you haven't told me yet?"

"Not in so many words—I admit," agreed Sheeda, as if amused; "it seems so obvious, that I didn't think it necessary."

"What shall I do then?" asked Nora, rising.

"I think that you might safely marry him," answered Mrs. Macaulay, feeling very much as if she were being placed on the witness stand.

As she paused, she met the girl's eyes looking fixedly at her, so she smiled encouragingly.

For a brief space, Nora's expression did not change; then like the sun peeping out from behind a cloud, she smiled.

# IX

## EDITH PONDERS

THE following Monday Edith was looking over her correspondence, which was unusually large that morning. In glancing hastily at the many superscriptions, one of them particularly arrested her attention, and she opened it at once.

It was, as she had guessed, from Nora, and, as she read it, she sighed.

Here is what Nora wrote her friend:

'Dear Edith,

I am sure you will be somewhat surprised to hear that I was married to Bradford Hoyt yesterday in Wilmington. There was nobody present but Sheeda Macaulay and Druce McAllister. I should like to have had you there too, but the fact is, I made up my mind to be married only at the last moment, so we were too much hurried to think of anything except the immediate ceremony. I hope you will not feel offended, as I should hate to lose the

friendship of one who had been my mother's friend, and to whose care she entrusted me. I know that I have laid myself open to criticism, but I feel strong enough to defy it, and besides, I am old enough to know my own mind, so what does it matter?

Do write me soon to Devon, where we have taken a house, and where we expect to be the latter part of next week. I have only been married a short time, but so far, I do not regret the step I have taken. My husband, rough diamond though he is, has been most considerate. I must confess that I am pining to get back to work, and strange as it may seem, I feel that Bradford misses his office also, though on the whole, he seems fairly contented. I think honeymoons are perfectly barbarous, as well as being decidedly boring, and I do miss my maid more than I can tell you; however, we shall be at home soon, and things will be different. To-morrow, we are going to Gettysburg, that is, if a slight repair to the motor is finished by that time, and I hope to get some good 'copy' there.

Bradford surprised me by his enthusiastic admiration of the beautiful country through which we are motoring, and I think seriously

of putting this unexpected phase of his character into one of my novels—my next one perhaps.

I have been out in the open air all day, and I am so sleepy that I can scarcely keep my eyes open, so I really must close.

Yours affectionately,

NORA HOYT.'

Edith's first feeling as she finished the letter was one of consternation, and she asked herself why Nora had found it necessary to take such a step, evidently without considering the seriousness of it! She must have acted quickly at the end, as, in fact, she had admitted, but there were other considerations which made her think that she might have been meditating this very step, even before she had left "Gleneyrie." There were incidents, too, which strengthened this thought, and made her wonder what was on the girl's mind when she left to go to Villa Nova. Somehow, the whole thing seemed rather sly, or, if not actually that, it, at least, denoted a lack of confidence, and Edith felt somewhat irritated that she should have been the victim.

It would have been so much better if Nora had consulted her first, instead of taking the initiative in such a secret way, but it was too late now to make objections.

Suddenly Edith felt very much alone, and yearned to discuss the affair with some one who could comfort her.

She confessed too, that Nora, during the short time she was a guest of her house, had identified herself to a certain extent with her own life, and this caused Edith to realize that she missed the girl.

She had been prevented from showing the affection which she had looked forward to bestowing on her whose confidence she hoped to win in the end, and this, doubtless, was what hurt her most.

Before Nora arrived, she had in imagination, clasped the girl to her heart, and though the reality had been quite different, she had never given up the idea of one day bringing her hope to fruition.

Miss Malcolm was making an effort to accept the situation with equanimity, though she found it no easy matter to sit down and reason with herself as if it were an occurrence of ordinary, everyday interest. She felt stifled, and pushing aside the other papers, rose to her feet, pacing the room with Nora's letter in her hand. Sometimes she paused to read over portions of it, and then resumed her walk, just as if she were engaged in her usual occupation of unravelling the threads of an abstruse situation.

She had read over the letter so hastily at first,

that she hardly had been able to grasp more than the bare fact, that Nora was a married woman. This had naturally started in her mind a doubt as to her own unworthiness, followed by the desire for comfort. She re-read the letter now more with a view of discovering if there were not some grains of comfort to be found in it.

She could not help smiling at the rather conventional expression of regret at her absence; that was so characteristic of Nora! What was meant to be in the nature of a dramatic climax was the reference to the possible loss of friendship, because she had been her mother's friend. This was unnecessary, for the simple reason that Nora herself had said that she had scarcely known her, and had not felt her death, except as that of a stranger. The allusion to criticism, and her ability to defy it, was but the bravado of a very young woman. How little Nora knew her that she should have thought it necessary to question her loyalty! She smiled more comprehendingly as the woman wrote of her husband—that he had been considerate! Perhaps, it might turn out well in the end; such marriages often did.

One note of sincerity rang out clear and true, however, that Nora was surely in earnest about her work; she did not intend to have that interfered

with, and this was the first scrap of comfort Edith could gather from the letter.

The closing thought as to 'copy' and the literary habit she had formed strengthened the girl's former words, adding materially to their honesty—but, there was not one word of love in the whole letter, not one single word! Why should she have married, if she only wished for a chance to continue her literary work? It seemed unnecessary and incongruous.

Nora had accepted a home without love, and had demanded that it should be a comfortable one, where she must be allowed to work undisturbed. Edith could now read easily between the lines.

Miss Malcolm stopped before the mantelpiece, and, tearing the letter across twice, threw the pieces into the fire. She tossed it aside like a cup that had been drained to the dregs. The bitter taste was still in her mouth, for the unsatisfied doubt as to her trusteeship persisted in remaining.

After all, had she not done everything possible to further the girl's interests? Should she not rather be thankful that she was safely married? This should be a relief to her whenever she thought of the history of Nora's mother. Would love ever be born of this union, or would the woman drift on in search of pleasure and excitement?

One thing that struck Edith very forcibly was the fact that Nora had never again referred to Leslie Griswold after that one evening, when she had apparently laid her heart bare. Had the girl been in love with him or not, and was this marriage merely a desire for a home, or was it accepted as a balm for wounded feelings?

Once more, the girl's love for the literary life cropped up, and, somehow Edith Malcolm felt easier in her mind.

# X

## AN AMAZING MARRIAGE

LATE in the autumn the Hoyts moved into Philadelphia, where they had rented a house for the season. Nora had an opportunity of being seen in the world, where she was admired, both on account of her good looks, as well as for her artistic gowns. She was rather proud of her taste in dress, and could not understand why most women of position wore a gown simply because it was "fashionable" never taking into consideration the individuality of the wearer. She was always stylish, but not always "fashionable."

Besides, Mrs. Hoyt had considerable charm, both in voice and manner, so that these, in addition to her wit, and the enigmatical expression of her eyes, drew men to her, like moths to a flame.

After a year of this fashionable life, in which Bradford did not participate to any extent, Nora confessed that she was tired. She had, to be sure, been burning the candle at both ends, as far as society and literary work went, and this she ex-

plained to herself, was the sole reason of her listlessness and lassitude.

The change from country to town, and back temporarily to the country in the spring, was welcome, while the summer at Narragansett had been amusing, but now, she longed to return to the country for an indefinite period, though not to the life of feverish activity, which she and her friends had previously led. Indeed, she yearned for peace and quiet, that she might dream away the present, and strive to shut out all thoughts of the future.

Up to the present time, Nora had continued her literary labors with considerable zest. She had had, too, a marked measure of success, and this so elated her, that she had planned to write her first novel.

Her previous work had been in the line of short stories and essays, while a clever translation of one of the latest Parisian successes had brought her name favorably to the notice of some of the best known managers in New York.

Nora's ambition instead of being sated by this recognition of her merits, spurred her on to further efforts, as was evidenced by the extraordinary output of the past year. But now, as the first days of autumn grew apace, she found it more and more impossible to concentrate her thoughts on her work.

For the first time, her mind seemed clogged by leaden weights.

Bradford thought she did not seem well, but as Nora volunteered no information as to the change in her life and habits, he did not seek to discover it, merely accepting her moods and vagaries as a matter of course.

He did strive in his selfish way to distract her, and with this end in view, suggested asking some people to dine. Nora, realizing the necessity of playing up to him, in order that he should not worry too much about her, finally consented, but with a feigned appearance of eagerness. At first, she had avoided the fixing of any definite date, and this fact had somewhat puzzled Bradford.

It was only after numerous secret consultations with Sheeda, that Nora decided it would be wiser to assume a more cheerful and willing attitude; though, she could not disguise from herself that this was becoming a more and more difficult task as the weeks dragged wearily on.

Time passed, however, and the evening of the dinner party arrived.

As Nora was being dressed, her maid remarked upon the unusually brilliant appearance of her mistress; and this had given her courage. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes afire—her whole being alert.

Bradford, when they sat in the drawing-room before the arrival of the guests, saw that he had not made a mistake in proposing the dinner, for already the good effects of his suggestion were apparent. He inwardly congratulated himself that he had the handsomest wife in his set. He looked at Nora for a moment in proud admiration, then seating himself, continued the working out of a financial problem which his wife's entrance had interrupted.

Nora looked wonderingly at Bradford, and it annoyed her to think he could not leave his business behind him, at the office, as other men did. Still, his worldly success had brought her all she had yearned for, and more.

How different the present was from the past! How changed the conditions!

He had provided her with a beautiful home, where she might work as she pleased, and he had given her a most generous personal allowance. She had written in this strain to Edith, but now, she yearned for more than that—she longed for love!

She felt it was impossible for her husband to give her what her heart craved, clever man that he was in so many ways. Oh, why had she not thought of this before? And for the first time since her convent days, she offered up a fervent prayer for guidance and help.

Later on, she felt Sheeda's eyes fastened on her, and thinking that she read a warning of her own failure to play the part she had agreed to enact, she turned impulsively to Druce McAllister. Intuitively, she fancied he was in sympathy with her. Had her prayer been answered?

If it were true, then now was the moment to put him to the test.

"Do you know that I consider Mrs. Macaulay the cleverest woman I ever met?" began Nora, in a low tone which was intended for Druce's ears alone.

"Yes,—but why do you think of that now?"

"Well—" hesitated Mrs. Hoyt, as if she felt that an explanation were necessary, "a few minutes ago, I looked up from a day-dream, because I fancied Sheeda's glance was fixed on mine. Somehow or other, I thought she had been able to read my thought. It was almost uncanny! Perhaps it was a reflex of the flash of understanding which passed between us when we first met that impelled me. You see, I have realized how well she had solved the problem of ordering her life along sympathetic lines, and it made me think that she, being the object of my thoughts, had—I wonder if you understand me—"

"Yes," he answered quietly, "I do."

"I am so glad!" she said, and then, catching her

breath, continued: "I have taken her as a model, though of course there is a difference between success in worldly affairs and literature."

"The only difference is in the starting-point," ventured Druce with a smile.

"Exactly!" exclaimed Nora, the color mounting suddenly to her cheeks, for she was relieved that he had made it easier for her to go on; "and after all, what is the real mission of the present-day woman?"

"Happiness seems to me the logical aim of every endeavor—or should be!" said McAllister, as if he wished to avoid a direct answer.

"But—what is woman's mission?" re-iterated Nora, with a touch of impatience.

She was unconscious that she had spoken louder than usual, until her husband's voice was heard from the other end of the table, answering her question.

"A woman's place is in her home—and nowhere else!"

"I don't know—" began a man's voice, "why a woman should be relegated entirely to the home. It seems to me a good deal like a fallacy at the present time. Of course" he added, "an Englishman's home is his castle, but—what about women—we can't get away from them, you know."

"Do you think we shall have to end by recognizing them, after all?" inquired Druce, as if interested; "what do you think about the suffrage question, Mrs. Hoyt?"

"I have never thought much about it, but I believe every woman should do what she thinks best. After all, each woman has to work out the problem of her own life, unaided and alone."

"If only the men would let us!"

After the laugh which these words occasioned had subsided, Bradford continued:

"A woman's mission is primarily to make a man's home attractive—a place where he will look forward to returning after the day's work is done—"

"That's all very well—but—where does the man come in?" asked Sheeda, mock-seriously.

"As the bread-winner!" And Bradford looked about him, as if challenging a reply; "and, the woman must be the help-meet."

"Which makes her merely man's slave!" interrupted Sheeda, scornfully: "why, my dear man! you are making her the instrument, while, in reality, she is the vehicle—"

"I don't agree with you!" exclaimed Bradford, excitedly; "why, take for example—a woman who brings children into the world! Isn't she fulfilling

the greatest mission God ever gave anyone to fulfill? Answer me that!"

"Yes, I quite agree with you," answered Sheeda, "but—you are just about three hundred years behind the times—"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Because you do not take into consideration the still greater destiny of rearing children. I suppose you are trying to tell me that she is strengthening her mission by the birth of every additional child—is that what you mean?"

"Yes, but I never thought of it in that way before," grumbled Bradford, not realizing that she was making fun of him.

"I don't care what you think—why! you seem to forget the devotion a woman gives her children! I have no patience with men—they are so selfish! You go to town and bring back a lot of money, and think you have done it all!" Mrs. Macaulay said, with a half glance at Nora, who, however, refused to meet her eye; "but," she added, with an undertone of real seriousness, "it is the happiest thing for a woman to bear a child—and I agree with you that it is the fulfillment of her destiny—still—it is not all!"

This time she looked at Nora questioningly,

though Sheeda fancied she detected just a shade of defiance in the glance which met hers.

"Then—you limit women to one sphere?" asked Mrs. Hoyt, quietly, turning to her husband.

"Yes—why not, when the man makes the home possible?"

Before Nora had a chance to reply, Sheeda broke in quickly:

"What about the women who are bread-winners?"

"Most of them are not married—that's no argument!"

"Yes, but married or single, if she be a bread-winner, why should she not count? I personally know several single women, who are earning a good wage. Each one takes care of two, in some instances, three people, a widowed mother, and a younger sister, for instance—but there is no fuss made about it. It is never mentioned. Not even her employer knows it, and even if he did, it would not impress him. But take a man who is married, who draws an indifferent salary for a while, when there is a chance for promotion, he gets it, because, forsooth 'the poor man has a wife!' But the woman who takes care of herself, her mother and her sister! How about her? She is not promoted. Can you tell me why?"

"Well, no, Mrs. Macaulay," said Bradford completely flabbergasted, "I don't know that I can."

"Perhaps it might be a debatable point—" murmured Alice diplomatically.

"I tell you," said Sheeda emphatically to Bradford, "that if—the artistic career amounts to a ruling passion—nothing, not even children, will prevent its fulfillment. Surely, I could not give you a more splendid example of this, than that of the great Madame Schumann-Heinck."

"I'm out of my depth!" cried Bradford, in despair; "I can't follow you!"

Nora, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders, and a light laugh, nodded to Sheeda, and rose from the table.

# XI

## A DEBATABLE POINT

It was not until several months after the baby was born, that Nora, with a feeling of compunction, realized that she had never invited Edith to visit her since her marriage. She determined to despatch the long-delayed note.

Edith, whose temperament was too serene to feel any actual grudge, accepted, and soon afterward, arrived at Devon.

She and Nora, of course, corresponded, and with her keen insight, Miss Malcolm had succeeded in reading betwen the lines, but now, she hoped to be able to verify her conclusions by actual proof.

Throughout her brief acquaintance with the girl, despite many adverse elements to the contrary, she had seen much to admire, and had often wondered whether Nora would ever meet the one man who would satisfy her in every way.

The two women were returning, one morning from hunting, and had both enjoyed the brisk run

in the keen country air; now, in the added warmth of the pale sunlight, they were walking their horses homeward-bound.

"I have never told you how wonderfully sweet I think your little son is!" said Edith.

"Yes!" said Nora briefly.

"You must love him very dearly, don't you, dear?"

"I'm afraid I hardly know!" laughed Nora, and then, checking herself, added apologetically: "I was ill after he was born—then I was busy with my novel—and—I believe the nurse is quite satisfactory. Come, Edith! do let's have another gallop—I'm getting cold."

"I'm sorry to hear you speak like that—"

"I think I can explain. I couldn't nurse him, you see,—and he was taken away from me before I really had a chance to know him—I believe it's not unusual. But—don't let's talk any more about the baby—I must get home before I freeze!" And laughingly, she touched her horse, dashing off while Edith, somewhat stunned, followed as best she might.

It was not until after luncheon that Edith found another opportunity of seeing Nora again, and, this time, she determined to speak out her mind more freely, more brutally, if necessary.

"Your husband goes to town every day, I suppose?"

"Yes," she answered with a laugh, which Edith fancied was a trifle bitter; "he goes to town at dawn, and comes out in time to dress for dinner. It leaves me ample time for work, which I love, but—I might as well be married to a creature of wood, for all the companionship I get out of him."

"What do you mean?" asked Edith sternly, for she had detected a touch of seriousness in her friend's tone.

"Merely that we have very little in common. His life and interests are entirely in his business. He has only one other interest—"

"And what is that?" asked Edith quickly.

"His child!"

"But—it is yours, too—surely, you must see that that is a bond between you—one that will grow stronger as the years pass. Ah! Nora, you are making a terrible mistake. You should make the child a factor—"

"I cannot!"

"Why not, dear?" inquired Edith more gently; "won't you tell me—honestly—why not?"

"Why shouldn't I?" broke in Nora tensely; "though I don't suppose you intend to make this a matter of common gossip—"

"Oh, Nora dear! You shouldn't have said that—I thought you knew me better—but go on!"

"I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt your feelings." There was every appearance of contrition, though she spoke coldly.

Edith leaned forward, as if about to speak.

"Don't say anything yet!" anticipated Nora, and Edith saw clearly that this time the girl was holding herself well in check; "if I am to tell you what you wish to know, I must do so at once—in my own way. It is a matter—I must speak about—now—on the impulse of the moment. Listen, and don't interrupt!"

Edith obeyed implicitly, for as Nora paused, she saw how completely absorbed the younger woman was. Unable to endure the sight of that tense face, she looked away, and waited, until she was ready to speak. Roused at last by a feverish note in the other's voice, she glanced up, faced Nora as if fascinated, and listened intently.

"I did not love my husband when I married him—I wanted a home—I wanted to work, and that was the way it happened! He never makes mistakes. My work means nothing to him—he cannot understand it—the child—everything. Having brought a son into the world—he might have rewarded me by paying some—the slightest attention

to me, but—he did not—he could not! I had fulfilled my part, and he had no further use for me—for the time being.

"It was one of those chances that come but once—and he missed it. He could have turned to me—one glance—one word—it would have been enough—but he had eyes only for the child—not one word to say to me—I, who had endured all for his sake. I might have cared for the child—all might have been well between my husband and myself—but, now it is too late!"

"It was a mistake for you to have married him without love," said Edith as calmly as she could; "still, I don't see what you have to complain of—"

"You mean that I got the home, the place where I could work? Yes, you are right, and he—the child—the son that he wished. What I wanted, and did not get was—recognition—sympathy—"

"Poor child!"

"And any one who is artistic knows how much one needs that," said Nora with a sigh.

"I never had any one to advise me—I was forced to fight out my battle alone!"

"You did not expect help from any one. You were alone—but—I am not!"

"To all intents and purposes you are! My poor

Nora, how can you look for sympathy—from a man like Bradford? He has none to give!"

"But—I must have sympathy. My nature craves it, and I should be literally starved without it."

"My dear girl, if you could only love your child, you could look on that love as a sheet anchor—"

"In theory—yes—but in practice—no!"

"Could you not try?"

"No."

"Won't you be more explicit?" begged Edith.

"If you insist, yes! If, when the child was born —the child he wished for more than anything else in the world, he had turned to me for an instant —I believe I could have forgiven him, even for his lack of sympathy in my literary work! If he had only smiled at me, as a small proof of his love for me—it was a psychological moment—all would have been well. But he showed clearly that he cared only for the child I had given him—that was all!"

"I don't see why that should prevent you from loving your child—it would only be human—"

"Because I did not want the child; I wanted to be able to pursue my work."

"But you must have realized that the birth of a child was a possibility—"

"I did not think about it."

Edith preferred to leave the situation as it was, so she said nothing further.

To be sure, Bradford was immersed in business, and it was equally certain that selfishness formed a predominant part of his nature; but the wife's attitude seemed to Edith one of false pride. What a pity!

A bell sounded, and Nora rose to her feet.

Edith looked up as Druce McAllister entered the room.

"I hope I am not late!" he said.

## XII

### NORA'S FRIENDS ARE WORRIED

EDITH had been lunching with Mrs. Wayne, and they had discussed a number of congenial topics.

Cynthia had found Miss Malcolm singularly sympathetic, and Edith, for her part, had made up her mind that Mrs. Wayne was a woman after her own heart.

One subject, however, Edith had been chary of approaching, and that was Nora Hoyt. She knew that Cynthia was a good friend of Nora's, but it is one thing to consider discussing a mutual friend, and quite another actually to do it. The consequences were that she flirted with the subject without really entering upon it.

This feinting continued for some time, until Edith realized that the clock was striking four.

"I had no idea it was so late!" she exclaimed apologetically, and rose to go. "I hope I have not overstaid my welcome!"

"Not at all!" answered Cynthia, laying a detain-

ing hand on her guest's arm; "I wish you wouldn't go yet—I have something I wish to talk to you about—that is—if you have time——"

"What is it?"

"It's about Nora Hoyt. I believe we are equally interested in her."

"Nora Hoyt!" exclaimed Edith, her face lighting up; "why didn't you let me know before that you wanted to do so!"

"I did not know how to begin; you see, it's such a difficult thing—it's almost like taking an unfair advantage——"

"Not if we are both in earnest, and if we are really interested in Nora."

"That is true, and if we can help her in any way. It makes the end justify the means, I suppose."

"You speak, dear Mrs. Wayne, as if we were a couple of conspirators, instead of being Nora's friends. You see," she continued, with a faint catch in her voice, "I knew Nora's mother, and, although she was older than I—I was her best friend. Perhaps you are familiar with her history, so you may well say that she did not deserve my friendship, but I am loyal to my friends, and believe one never was a friend, the moment he ceases to be one. I was able and willing to prove that friendship at a critical period of her unfortunate career. I sometimes won-

der whether Esther feared that her child might be like her! If so, it was remorse that prompted her to take steps to keep Nora out of harm's way—for she never repented her wicked life.

"When she died she confided Nora to my care. At the same time Nora came to me, she was already engaged to be married. I see that you are surprised, but all I am going to say is, that it was broken off, and I think it did embitter her nature for a time. It was then that she took up literature as a solace—it was no more than a pastime then—but you know that it has since grown and developed, until it has become the serious business of her life. It was shortly afterward that she met Bradford Hoyt. He fell in love with her at first sight, and they were married. I don't believe she knows just why she married him, but she would give you many reasons, as she did to me.

"After marriage, she had rather a rude awakening, when she realized that Bradford had married her for no other reason than because she was suitable, and eminently fitted to become the mother of his children, for outside of the interest he has in his business, he has an all-absorbing passion of his kind. I almost think that his love for Nora was dependent upon this possibility. But that is absurd. The truth of the matter is, that Bradford loves his

wife more than ever, but he does not realize it, because his love for his little son blinds him to the truth."

"What do you think will happen?"

"I hardly know—I hope nothing serious!" answered Edith uncertainly. "Nora was not in love with Bradford when she married him. One of the many reasons she gave for her marriage to him was, that he could give her a home—a place where she could work, undisturbed. That was silly of her, I think. Nora came near falling in love with her husband after marriage, and she would have, if she had got any response from him. Those were her very words, and it is so like Nora to say an absurd thing like that.

"She told me her work meant more to her than anything else, but I know better. When the supreme moment came, and that was when little Eliot was born, I think one heart-beat for her would have fanned the embers of his wife's love for him into a flame, but, the moment passed, and Nora's pride being hurt, caused her to rebel, and deceive herself into thinking that she cares neither for her husband nor for her child. The time will come, however, when she will realize that she has lost them both—everything, in fact—"

"But—in the meantime?"

"In the meantime," repeated Edith, "she is more and more drawn toward literature—and the sympathy in such work her husband refuses or finds impossible to give her."

"And, you think?"

"I think Nora sees a great deal too much of Druce McAllister!"

"I see what you mean, for Druce is artistic, warm-hearted, impulsive, adaptable—"

"Which makes him an exceedingly dangerous companion to enter into Nora's life at the present time."

"And, what do you advise?" queried Mrs. Wayne anxiously.

"I don't know," replied Edith gravely; "as I don't really know just how far matters have gone between them."

"Do you think that she herself realizes she is drifting?"

"No!" answered Edith, slowly shaking her head; "I think Mr. Druce McAllister is far too clever to let her know that she is awake, before he is ready for her to look about her!"

"You are making Druce out to be a villain—"

"I am making him out to be a man who is willing to play with fire, because he wishes to be burnt. Surely, you are not old-fashioned enough to be-

lieve in platonic friendship! Man, my dear, is not so wholly disinterested as that!"

"Oh, I know it!" cried Cynthia impatiently; "but it depends on how well he plays his cards, I should say!"

"Well, I think it is a great pity that Nora ever married!"

At this moment a servant entered the room, and said that Mrs. Macaulay had driven up, and wished to know whether Mrs. Wayne would see her.

"Of course. Show her in!"

When the servant went out, Mrs. Wayne rose, and coming quickly to Edith looked earnestly down at her.

"I wonder if Sheeda is the best friend in the world for Nora to have!"

"My dear!" answered Edith softly; "remember that though we are friends of Nora's, she would only listen to what we say with a cynical smile—a pitying one, perhaps, for we are no longer individuals to her, but part of a system. She has drifted away from us—my dear. She has outgrown us—that is it, and all we can do is to try to save her from herself."

Mrs. Macaulay entered the room briskly, exhaling an invigorating breath of the outer air, which was chill and penetrating.

She paused just within the room.

"I never saw two such guilty looking women!" she said laughing.

As her remark did not seem to call for an answer, both Edith and Cynthia laughed too.

"What I came to suggest," explained Sheeda, "was that we get up a game of bridge. Who could we get for a fourth? Why not Nora? Would you mind if I called her up on the telephone?"

"Not at all!" said Mrs. Wayne. "I wonder whether she would come!"

"Perhaps you don't care to play;" suggested Sheeda, who had surprised a sudden glance between the two women, which she had not been able to interpret.

"It was not for myself. I was wondering whether Miss Malcolm—" ventured Mrs. Wayne tentatively.

"Oh, I should love to have a rubber or so!" broke in Edith, who had her own reasons for bringing Nora and Sheeda together under her own eye.

When Mrs. Macaulay had telephoned, the three women entered into conversation, while they waited for Mrs. Hoyt.

In an incredibly short space of time, the lady made her appearance.

"How did you ever get here so soon?" inquired Sheeda.

"Well, the chauffeur had gone to town, but—Druce ran me over—he was a very good substitute!" replied Nora smiling.

Sheeda laughed, but the other two women exchanged a quick look of mutual understanding.

# XIII

## THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

THE impressions received during that bridge game remained firmly fixed in Edith's memory for many a day. For the first time, she realized how much Nora had changed. She was no longer the young girl fresh from the convent, and under the spell of a first love affair; she was a woman now, with a woman's aspirations, for she had gained much in mental poise.

The friendship between the two had evidently gone further than she had thought at first. This was an undeniable fact. Druce was becoming a factor in Nora's life, but, so far, the woman did not seem aware of it. He was playing on the one string that he knew would respond, and he would continue with infinite patience to pluck at it until her soul vibrated in unison with his. The woman only knew that the man was helping her sympathetically with her work, the work that she loved;

therefore, Miss Malcolm made up her mind that the girl was in no immediate danger, because she did not know that she was adrift.

Cynthia's suggestion that Mrs. Macaulay might not be the best friend for Nora caused Edith momentary uneasiness, until she concluded that she could scarcely be considered a negligible quantity for the present. She would have to declare her intentions before she could be recognized as a dangerous factor in the game. It was a game, for was not each one of them trying to discover a move that would change Nora's destiny?

In the years that followed, Edith had no reason to change her mind, for, as she made a yearly visit to Nora, she had a good opportunity for seeing how matters stood with her.

It was not until a second child, a daughter, had been born to the Hoyts that she was to take another and a totally different view of the situation. The advent of this child wrought a distinct change in Nora's nature, and for the first time, Edith saw that she welcomed the coming of the new life. The bond between the mother and child was all the stronger from the beginning, because Nora was able to nurse her baby, which made Edith call the little creature in her heart, the child of promise.

To be sure, the friendship between Druce and

Nora continued, but, somehow, the birth of little Wanda had altered its character, and had taken away an element of present danger.

Nora was working just as hard on her new novel, and Druce was ever at hand to help her, but, there was the new interest, which, if it did not actually supersede, did lessen the former absorbing quality of the work, to some extent. This was very promising to Edith that all would still be well with Nora.

Late one afternoon, many years afterward, Edith who was making Nora her annual visit, went up to the nursery with her to play with the children.

"How old is Wanda, now?" asked Edith.

"Nearly seven. Don't you think she is lovely?"

"Yes, dear, and she is exactly like you. Indeed, both of your children are beautiful, I think."

"I am glad you think so, for I am proud of them —both." And she looked wistfully at the two children, who were playing on the floor, the boy with a train, the girl with a much battered doll.

"Eliot is eleven, isn't he?" inquired Edith.

"Yes!" was the curt answer.

Edith detected a reflection of the past in the shortness of this remark; the wound caused by Bradford's neglect had healed, but the scar evidently remained.

"What am I to do with this dolly of mine? She's awful pale to-day!" cried Wanda, turning to Eliot.

"Just hustle her on my train—that'll fix her up all right."

"She ain't well enough to travel yet. Doncher know she's been terrible sick?"

"What's been the matter with her?"

"She's had measles, mumps, rheumatism and croup."

"My! That's fierce!"

"Yes, the doctor sat up with her all night, and I never closed my eyes—did I, Janet?"

"No, Miss Wanda—that you did not!"

"Well, change of air would do her good—and it wouldn't cost you anything extra," remarked Eliot.

"I'll ask dad—he's the doctor, y'know," answered Wanda.

Edith who had been watching the two children with profound interest, turned to Nora impulsively.

"They are too sweet together—and Wanda is so much in earnest!"

"Yes," replied Nora listlessly; "she has a wonderful amount of imagination."

"Most children have. I don't know which is the more important—imagination, or a sense of humor."

"To a child I should think imagination was es-

sential, but to an older person a sense of humor is more important."

"Or a sense of the ridiculous," suggested Edith smiling.

"I don't know what's the matter with my train—it's always running off the track! I'll have to ask dad about it."

"I suppose you kill lots of people on that road?" inquired Wanda, speaking over her shoulder.

"Oh, lots!" said Eliot blandly; "you see, it's run just like a real railroad, and this is the time of year for wrecks!"

"Yes, I suppose so," agreed the child dubiously; "and that's the reason I don't want my sick dolly to go on your cars, because I'd hate to have her killed dead!"

"Every mother thinks a lot of her child, but my road's as safe as any of 'em—and it's making money."

"I wouldn't care about the money, if my dolly was killed—it wouldn't bring her back to me—alive and kicking!"

Just then, Bradford entered the room. Both children appealed to him at once.

"I wish you'd fix this engine, dad!" cried Eliot; "I'm losing time and money, because the train is always getting out of order."

"Tell me what's the matter with this dolly?" begged Wanda; "I'm afraid she's dying."

Bradford put the train in order, and then, turned to his daughter.

"Didn't that medicine do her any good, the other day?" he asked gently.

"No, she's still sick, I tell you!"

Edith suddenly went down on her knees, and straightened out a section of Eliot's track, but Nora remained immovable.

"What's the matter with this young lady, pet?" asked Bradford mock-anxiously.

"I don't know!" replied Wanda tearfully.

"Oh! we'll fix her up all right!" exclaimed Bradford, "don't you worry about that!"

He mixed an imaginary potion, and then, turned to his son, who claimed his attention at this moment.

Edith moved over to Wanda, and looked up at Nora. She surprised a look of pain on the mother's face, and glanced quickly away.

Nora, realizing that something was expected of her, rose and knelt by her daughter.

"Is she warm enough?" she asked, solicitously, drawing the afghan closer about the doll.

"Why, she has a fever—I'd think you'd know that, mother!" exclaimed the little girl, scornfully; "you always get things mixed."

"I'm sorry—I'll try to do better next time!" murmured her mother contritely, and she sighed softly, though no one seemed to have noticed it but Edith.

"Don't you know what to do when a child has a fever?" asked Wanda.

"Oh, yes!" said Nora, and Edith noticed the helplessness of her tone.

"Mother's tired, I think!" interposed Edith, with a half glance at Nora; "of course, she knows what to do, when a dolly is ill."

Nora gave Edith a grateful look. Presently she rose, and approached her son.

She stood, and looked down at him thoughtfully.

"Does it go better now?" she inquired.

"Yes, but you are standing in the way of the train. It's going to pass soon—and it's two minutes late now."

"Oh, is it?" she said; "how stupid of me not to have known it!" And, suddenly she drew back.

Edith saw that, after a moment of hesitation, the mother returned to her former seat, and sat there silently watching, like some outsider, who had no part in the game.

The husband was absorbed in his children, and paid no attention to his wife. He hardly appeared to be aware of her presence.

"Eliot!" he exclaimed; "put that signal straight —come here at once—Mary's fainted!"

Edith laughed, and watched Bradford with considerable amusement, as he gave his attention to each of the children in turn. Then, she looked up in Nora's direction, but the mother had left the room.

# XIV

## LOVE *versus* LETTERS

"DRUCE," said Nora, one afternoon, as they were seated in her study, during what had been accepted as the daily working hour, "I don't know how to go on with my book. Let's talk it over, and incidentally, I wish you would tell me what you think of it, as far as it has gone."

"I like it exceedingly, and I think you have made all your points very cleverly. The chapter before the last one seemed to me to drag a little, but, you cured that in the following one. It was rather sad, but so charmingly done."

"You mean where the mother is unable to put herself in touch with her children?"

"Yes, but—how did you ever think of such a situation? It is pathetically human—almost true to life."

"It was taken from life—that's the reason!" answered Nora, her voice trembling slightly; "you see, the other day I tried to play with the children, and somehow, I didn't succeed. I was always get-

ting in the way and doing the wrong things. I suppose I was tired—"

In the scarcely suppressed sigh with which Nora brought her speech to a close, Druce detected a shade of bitterness, and—other things as well, which he treasured up in his heart.

"Still, it was clever of you to have thought of using it. It was just the touch needed. I have often wanted to ask you how you manage to evolve such splendid plots!" he concluded, looking fixedly at her.

"Oh—the story itself is purely fiction." But she carefully avoided meeting his eyes as she spoke.

"They all seem such real characters that I could almost swear you had taken them from real life!"

"It is possible to draw a character," protested Nora feebly; "which seems life-like, and which many people would say they recognized as some one they had known, whereas—each one of my characters is simply a composite of a number of people whom I have run across—at one time or another." And she looked in an almost frightened way at Druce, as she attempted to smile naturally.

"I see!" he rejoined dryly; "now before we continue our discussion of the book, I should really like to talk over those characters with you."

Reading assent in her glance, which was fixed

upon his as if fascinated, he continued to speak, choosing his words carefully.

"I like the lawyer who eats law for breakfast, who chews the cud of legal reflection flavored with dust from his law-books for luncheon, and who tries his cases over in the evening after dinner. The wife, and it's hard luck for her to be tied to a piece of parchment like that—makes a mistake to be so completely absorbed in her painting, but—I like the painter-chap who gives her advice; he seems to me to be very well drawn, because he manages to keep people in the dark as to his real intentions."

"You mean the wife, especially, I suppose?" exclaimed Nora, brusquely.

"Yes. He was making love to the wife, and she, poor thing, thought he was only showing her how to paint. A dangerous position, indeed, for any woman."

"She was looking for sympathy—" and then, she paused quite suddenly.

"And she got it, didn't she?" said Druce with an equivocal smile.

"Yes, but you don't seem to understand. I never meant the man to be in love with the woman. It never occurred to me that he could be in love with her. Really, the ego is so strong in every man. that he firmly believes no man and woman can

remain in each other's company for any length of time, but they must promptly fall in love."

"Really?" queried Druce in polite surprise; "I should think it would have been the most natural inference in the world."

"Perhaps," assented Nora, as if the confession were forced from her; "but that would change the whole point of the story."

"And yet, it would be the most logical conclusion possible! I thought that was what you intended to do. Don't you agree with me, that if a man and a woman are thrown together a good deal, it is inevitable that they should fall in love, sooner or later?"

"I have just given you my opinion on this point," she said with some heat.

"How do you intend to end your story?" he asked with a sudden change of manner.

"Really! I don't know." She was experiencing a re-action from her previous excitement. "What do you suggest?"

"It's hard to say. There are so many possible endings," he admitted, with a certain amount of seriousness; "the title of your novel—I believe you are calling this one 'Paying the Debt,' should be of some assistance in helping us to work out the story

to its proper conclusion. Of course, it depends on the point of view one takes—"

"The point of view! Yes, that makes all the difference in the world. Druce!" she said breathlessly; "you have awakened old ones—I don't know which—oh! I can't seem to make myself clear, I am afraid, but, I seem to have run up against a stone wall—and, I don't know what to do with my story."

"There are many ways of ending a book of that kind," said Druce in his most persuasive and tactful manner; "you might have the painter people fall in love with each other, and then, in a thoroughly modern and rather banal way, have them marry, after she had divorced her husband!"

"I wish you would be serious for at least two minutes at a time!" exclaimed Nora.

"I am serious—I thought you knew me better than that!" said Druce, and his tone was such that she looked up sharply, to surprise a fire in his eyes, which confusing and troubling her, made her look quickly away.

"The book will end naturally at the proper time, as everything else does—invariably," he added quickly, for he was forcing himeslf to be calm; "don't worry about it! Let it work itself out—as it will and must!"

She was silent, and was looking straight in front of her.

"Can't you trust me, Nora?" he began anxiously.

"Yes—I do!" And the faint hesitation told the man that the battle with her was not yet won.

He looked at the clock, and started to his feet.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed; "it's later than I thought. I must be off. Though Bradford is my friend, it might be better for me not to be seen here —by him," he murmured, as he bent over her hand, and then quickly left the room.

Nora sat immovable, like one stunned.

Had Druce been speaking in parables, or had his words been uttered at random?

The grating of a key fitted into the front door aroused her from her revery, and she rose, and passed quickly into the library adjoining.

A rush of cold air, and the banging of the door followed. After hanging up his coat and hat, and catching sight of his wife, Bradford stepped into the library.

"You are back a little earlier than usual—I was just going up stairs—to lie down. I must rest!" she stammered.

"Just wait a minute—I've something to tell you!" cried Bradford excitedly; "I made some easy money to-day!"

"Indeed!" She suppressed a yawn. "You must tell me all about it, later on, after dinner." But she did not attempt to disguise the boredom in her tone, as she turned and left the room.

Bradford gave a low whistle.

"Bless my soul! I wonder what the trouble is?"

He took two or three turns up and down the room, and without rhyme or reason, paused before the door of Nora's study. Then he opened it and went in.

He glanced at the bookshelves, at the desk with its mass of papers, and at the chair where he imagined Nora had just been sitting. He noticed that another chair had been placed near the first one, and somehow, it looked out of place.

As he moved forward to push it aside, his eye fell upon an ash-tray on the corner of the desk. On it were lying side by side, the half-burnt ends of two cigarettes, one of which he recognized as a brand that Nora smoked. The other he picked up, and examined. It was a cigarette much affected by Druce McAllister. Becoming aware of this, he dropped it, and then sighing, turned away, and switched off the electric light.

# XV

## SHEEDA TALKS

THAT evening at dinner Nora ate little; while Bradford, with eyes intent upon his plate, devoured greedily everything that was offered to him.

Not a word was spoken during the meal, but afterward, Nora who felt the effect of the strain, succeeded in drawing Bradford out on the subject of his business, for anything was better than this unbearable silence between them.

Thus, the evening passed, but Nora was distinctly uneasy, because Bradford had not for one instant referred to Druce, though she was perfectly aware that her husband knew he had been there.

Perhaps it was the effect of a guilty conscience which made her attach undue importance to this incident, but what had contributed to this feeling of anxiety, was the fact that her husband had omitted his perfunctory good-night kiss, and had closed the door between their rooms. There had been, too, a certain degree of finality about his ac-

tion which precluded the possibility of any protest on her part.

The next morning, Nora feeling the need of comfort, made her way to Sheeda's house. She found herself in a quandary, and felt that she must have advice. To whom, therefore, should she turn for it but to Sheeda Macaulay, her best friend.

Sheeda was in her morning-room, but she seemed quite willing to be interrupted in her writing.

"I look on your coming as distinctly providential," she said, rising and coming forward to embrace her friend; "as I hate to tell so many lies in the morning; it seems so unnecessarily immoral—early in the day. But—what is the matter, child? You look pale and worried!"

"I *am* worried, and—I must speak to you!"

"Sit down, dear; I feel that this is going to be serious."

"I came to tell you, Sheeda," cried Nora, suddenly, "that I don't know what to do! You see, Bradford has become—unbearable, and—my children look on me as a nonentity—besides, I wonder whether my reaching out after sympathy has been a mistake—

"Because I'm afraid Bradford knows about Druce, and attaches undue importance to the help he has been giving me in my work!"

"He does, does he?" exclaimed Sheeda, scornfully; "I must say that that is very tactless of him!"

"What do you mean?"

"My dear Nora! I explained to you my views of marriage—that I considered it a contract, and that that is the only way to treat it, if one wishes to be free and happy. Don't interrupt me! As the time passed you realized that you needed sympathy from the man you married, but you suddenly discovered that his nature was so limited he could not give it to you. This demand for sympathy came after marriage, and though Bradford did not recognize it as a part of the moral contract, you had accepted it as an integral and essential part of it. As you could not get that sympathy from your husband, you sought for it elsewhere, and Druce McAllister stood willing and ready to supply it."

"Yes, that is perfectly true—"

"It is unfortunate, I think," continued Mrs. Macaulay, pitilessly, "that your children have not been able to play a more important part in your life, as mine have. I don't quite understand what it is that keeps you apart—"

"What difference does it make?" moaned Nora; "but, you know that I am proud of both my children, that I long to win them, and take them to my heart, but—I don't know how!"

"That's why I said it was unfortunate," said Sheeda, "now my children have been a great comfort to me, and I only wish yours could be the same to you. However, you've got your work to fall back on—to fill the void."

"My work requires tremendous concentration, but—Sheeda! what do you advise me to do? Shall I stick it out, or shall I take matters into my own hands?"

"If you stick it out, it might please the world better; but, as you say it's become unbearable to continue living with your husband, perhaps you'd better think about taking matters into your own hands, as you say!"

"You advise me to leave him, then?"

"My dear!" exclaimed Sheeda; "before I answer you, let's look carefully at the facts of the case! You got your home—Bradford got the children, but—he did not give you the deference you exacted, or the sympathy you craved. It seems to me that this question of sympathy is the rock upon which your ship of marriage must sooner or later come to grief; that is why I counsel you to take the initiative, provided you have come to the end of your resources and patience. I suppose you will marry Druce, when you have freed yourself from Bradford—"

"I—had not thought of it!" began Nora, but Sheeda, with a laugh, took the words out of her mouth.

"My dear Nora! that is one of the feeblest attempts at prevarication I ever heard. You needn't tell me that he is not in love with you, and that you are not in love with him, or on the point—"

"I am not—I won't have you say such a thing!"

"Well—never mind! but—tell me what you intend to do."

"I came here to find out—" ventured Nora, timidly; and then meeting Sheeda's eye, paused suddenly.

"I shall tell you then, though I'm afraid you will consider my views startling and decidedly progressive. I have always thought it distinctly immoral for a woman to continue to live with her husband if she does not love him. My second thought is, that, under the circumstances, she should free herself, and marry the man of her choice!"

Nora looked long and fixedly at her companion before she spoke.

"If you found yourself confronted by such a proposition, would you act as you are advising me to act?"

"I honestly believe I should, but—it would de-

pend in a measure on the circumstances of the case. I am not certain—"

Nora rose, quickly crossed the room, and then, turned to Sheeda.

"I am much obliged for your advice, my dear friend, for I believe you have given it to me from your heart!"

Sheeda, who had been gazing fixedly at the carpet, looked up after a pause, with a faint protest trembling on her lips; but it was too late, for Nora had gone like a shadow, gone—perhaps beyond recall!

# XVI

## MRS. WAYNE ACTS FOR THE BEST

When Nora returned home she entered the library with the intention of going to her study, but, Cynthia Wayne, who had been waiting to see her, rose from a chair beside the fire, and intercepted her.

"I wish to speak to you—Nora—you were on the way to your study—would we not be more free from interruption there?"

Nora, intuitively recognizing a new antagonist, led the way into her study.

After Cynthia had entered the room, Nora carefully closed the door, and looked inquiringly at her guest, whom she had motioned to a chair near her desk, where she had seated herself.

Mrs. Wayne glanced at Nora, and smiled in that good-natured way of hers. But meeting no response, her expression changed to one of severity.

"I shall not mince matters," she said, looking earnestly at Nora; "and, you might as well know that you are being very much talked about in the

neighborhood. Your name is continually being linked with that of Druce McAllister, and I wish to know whether there is any truth in what they are saying?"

"The countryside is very kind to interest itself in my affairs—" began Nora ironically.

"People always interest themselves in anything that is out of the ordinary—"

"I consider that society has no business to meddle with my private affairs—"

"The members of society out here are your friends, and I think it is very ungracious of you not to care what they think about you—"

"Well—what do they say?"

"They say that you do not love your husband—that your children mean nothing to you, and that you are receiving marked attention from a man who is making love to you under the guise of a fellow-worker!"

"That is not true! Mr. McAllister is merely a disinterested friend. People out here should have something better to do than to talk about their neighbors."

"You acknowledge that you have seen a great deal of Druce?"

"Why should I deny it? I'm not ashamed of it. Has any one dared to criticize me for that?"

"Of course they have! I see no reason why they should not, when you have defied the conventionalities in the blatant way you have!"

"It is a piece of impertinence! How dare they?" But she quailed before the severity of Mrs. Wayne's glance, and her eyes fell.

"Can't you realize your wrong-doing—that this man is only playing with literature to gain you? Can't you really see that?"

"No!" said Nora, in open defiance; "I cannot!"

"My poor Nora! I did not think you could be so blind—so easily influenced. You will acknowledge that I am right, one day—I know that you will!"

"Never!" cried Nora passionately.

"Possibly not, and when you cannot or will not distinguish the difference between a casual interest in your work and—love for yourself!"

"Druce has never told me that he loves me—"

"I don't suppose he has—he is much too clever to throw down his cards until he is certain that the winning trick is his!"

"What is there for me to say? You have made up your mind that Druce is a scoundrel, so that everything he does—every action of his, must be measured or weighed by your peculiar standard. I quite see that—oh, quite!"

"Will you listen to me for a moment?" begged Cynthia.

"Why, certainly!" agreed Nora, rather insolently; "I might get a few ideas from you that I could use later on. Go on!"

"I fully expected opposition—"

"Oh, don't explain—I beg of you!"

"You wretched girl!" cried Cynthia, angrily; "I shall not spare you. I shall tell you exactly what I think—what the world thinks—and if your eyes are not opened then, why—I wash my hands of you, that's all! In the first place, you did not love Bradford when you married him—"

"Which was a distinctly immoral thing to do—I see that now!" admitted Mrs. Hoyt, complacently.

"And now, you are thinking of freeing yourself from him, that you may marry your—affinity!"

"Do you think he is really my affinity?" inquired Nora; "if you do, it would justify any action I might decide to take—"

"I do not agree with you at all!" announced Cynthia, stoutly.

"Really, that's a pity, for you see I firmly believe it would be much more moral for me to free myself from a man I do not, and cannot love, and, once free, marry the man I really loved!"

"The whole trouble with you is, that you are inordinately selfish, and you are as obstinate as a mule. You have but one view-point, and that is—self. What have you ever done to try to win your husband? Has it ever occurred to you that you should have made the attempt to do so? Don't you know there can be no happiness in marriage where there is a total absence of mutual understanding? Furthermore, there must be forbearance—there must be something spiritual rather than the mere material relationship. Many marriages fail, just because the man and the woman won't stop to think of this very thing—until it's too late!"

"That is really very interesting!" began Nora, but she stopped suddenly, as she realized in time that such levity was out of place.

"If purely out of selfishness, you are giving up the love of a good man, you are wantonly destroying the spiritual part of marriage, and you will be living in sin with your second husband, just as much as if you lived with him. without the sanction of the Church!"

"That is very plain speaking!" said Nora, leaning her chin on her clasped hands; "but, unfortunately, I don't agree with you—we haven't the same point of view, you see!"

"That does not make the slightest difference;

because I am convinced that if you divorce Bradford, and marry Druce, you will be doing an immoral thing, and one that will never be sanctioned by society. Surely, you must know that! Dear Nora!" she pleaded; "consider what you contemplate doing, before it is too late."

"Perhaps it is too late, already—" suggested she, enigmatically.

"Then—it is all true—what they say—tell me!"

"I really couldn't say, because I don't know myself!"

"You have not actually decided to take any step yet?"

"I tell you I have not actually made up my mind—and, besides, I should have to tell Druce first—"

"What do you mean?" asked Cynthia, leaning forward.

"I mean I really couldn't take the initiative. You don't expect me to throw myself at his head, do you?"

"How unsatisfactory you are!" And poor Mrs. Wayne sighed.

"Yes. I suppose it will be a disappointment not to be able to tell your friends all about it—at first hand."

"I'm not certain yet, that I have failed—"

"Why?" asked Nora in surprise.

"Because you have practically disclosed your intentions."

"I wouldn't talk about it as assured—not just yet—because you might be mistaken—"

"That is possible, but not probable!"

"I'm not prepared to admit the distinction!" retorted Nora, with fine scorn.

"If that's the way you feel about it, I have but one thing to say. You are a colossal monument of selfishness, and you will realize it one day—when it is too late to retrieve the ground you have lost. You will know, then, that it is all your own fault. When you decide to do this monstrous thing, every one will say, and rightly, that you have absolutely no excuse for doing it. Of course, you will probably say in your characteristic way, that you are forced to take this step, because you have been intellectually starved. That is ridiculous and childish, and, you will lose the respect of all your friends by showing them the smallness of your mind."

Mrs. Wayne rose, and adjusted her furs.

"Must you really go?" inquired Nora, rising also.

"Yes, and I think it wiser to tell you that we are not inclined to take Mrs. Macaulay, excellent woman that she is, too seriously, out here, so—I wouldn't be guided too much by her theories, for

that's what they amount to—we are all well aware of that."

Bowing her head slightly, Cynthia swept from the room, leaving Nora rather dazed. Presently, she realized that Mrs. Wayne, her old friend, had not offered her her hand, in parting. She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"What do I care what they think?"

And, with a sudden, unconscious motion, stretched both arms high above her head, and smiled her inscrutable smile.

## XVII

### THE RIFT IN THE LUTE

THE next day being Sunday, Bradford went for his usual ride on horseback.

The finding of those two cigarettes had worried him, but, he had at that time, no suspicion of the truth; he only thought he had been remiss in not entering into Nora's interests, and that she had called in another to supply his place.

Often, as he rode along country lanes, he thought out problems, but now, he was confronted with one which was not only strange to him, but with which he was totally unfamiliar. It would require, therefore, all the more concentration, for that reason, and he could think all the better on the back of a horse, just as some men can collect their thoughts to better advantage when walking about, or lying in bed.

Shortly after Bradford's departure, Druce called up Nora on the telephone, and soon afterward made his appearance at the house. He tried to hide a

smile, when he saw that Nora had been eagerly awaiting him.

Druce was a born actor, and he knew that it behooved him to play his part carefully. He intended to make this interview memorable and decisive. He would make no mistakes that would defeat his object—to force this woman to capitulate.

"You wished to see me, Druce?" asked Nora, looking up at him from the depths of the chair she was sitting in; "what is it?"

"I came to say that I feel I shouldn't come here any more—" he replied, in a low voice; "it seems to me dishonorable."

"Not come here again!" began she with a slight tremor in her voice; "dishonorable! I don't understand—"

"To your husband, I meant. It might appear to him as if I were stealing in like a thief. You see, I am always careful of appearances, over careful, perhaps—but it is better to be on the safe side."

"I see! I see perfectly, but—I don't see why you should consider my husband—he hasn't shown me much consideration. Why Druce! You don't know how much I have prized these hours we have spent together—and—I should miss you horribly! Surely, you won't desert me, just when I am beginning to depend upon you, will you?"

"I wouldn't do anything to cause you one moment's unhappiness. I wasn't thinking of myself—"

"I knew I could trust you—whatever they said!"

"Who are 'they' my dear?"

"Oh—the people about here, who have nothing better to do than to interest themselves in the affairs of their neighbors!"

"We should be above such idle gossip. We are strong enough to defy the opinion of such people, aren't we?"

"Yes, but we can't afford to defy public opinion, can we?"

"Yet that's just what we are doing—by being so much together."

"I suppose we are, but it seems strange to me that one has to be bound down by conventionality—entirely!"

"It is hard to draw the line, and—satisfy—every one, isn't it?" suggested Druce.

"Still, it could be done, couldn't it?"

"Perhaps!" he admitted, as if grudgingly; "but—it's rather dangerous to play a game of that kind. You see, I was thinking of you—"

"I know, and I appreciate your consideration—"

"Don't! You wrong me—you put me in a false position—really you do!"

"Druce!" cried Nora suddenly; "this situation

must be thought out. We must face it. We can't get away from it. What *are* we to do? What ought we to do?"

"We shall just have to go on with it—"

"Yes, and show the world we are not afraid!"

"Why should we be afraid? We haven't done anything wrong!"

"No!" replied Nora, and suddenly, looked away.

"I admit, though, that any one who did not understand might be apt to think so—"

"There are always disagreeable people everywhere, but—how could they conceive such a thing?"

"How indeed!" was the dry rejoinder.

"You know that we are not doing anything wrong!" insisted Nora.

"No, I don't suppose we are, and—I have loved these hours we have spent together—they have meant more to me than I can express!"

"Druce! Druce!"

"Why should they end?"

"They cannot!"

"Dear! don't you understand? No! I can't go on. I must go—your husband might return at any moment—"

He rose abruptly, and backed slowly to the door, but Nora did not change her position. He turned

away, and as he reached the threshold, paused before he went out.

Nora looked up quickly.

"Don't go! Don't go!" she said. Then she jumped quickly to her feet, and stretched out her arms to him. "I could not bear to have you leave me, now!"

He turned and took a few steps forward.

"What do you mean?" he asked passionately.

"I mean that you shall not go—"

"Until—"

"Until you tell me—" she hesitated.

"That I love you? Then you shall hear it now, and you—do you love me? Tell me! I must know —I must know!"

Nora looked at him, and suddenly, she grew white as death.

"I am afraid!" she breathed.

"What is there to fear?"

He saw that her eyes were wide with apprehension. Soon, however, the eyelids narrowed, and she threw back her head.

"I love you!" she cried, and suddenly she clung to him, until with a cry, she pushed him from her, and clasped her hands convulsively together. "Some one is coming! My God! If it should be my husband!"

McAllister stood perfectly still, his soul still in

his eyes, but as Bradford entered the room, he recovered himself, and smiled at Hoyt, in greeting.

"Well, I'm afraid I must be going!" he said, and held out his hand.

Bradford deliberately thrust his hands deep in the pockets of his coat.

"Yes—I think you had better go—unless you wish to be kicked out! I give you fair warning that if I ever find you here in my house again—it will be the worse for you. Go!"

McAllister shrugged his shoulders, and left the room. There was nothing to say.

Husband and wife were alone, but she did not move, she seemed frozen to the spot.

Bradford walked quickly up and down the room, then stopped to look out of the window for a moment. Suddenly turning toward her, with both his arms outstretched, he said with an effort: "Sit down, little woman. I have something to say to you!"

Nora bent forward, and buried her face in her hands.

"IF I EVER FIND YOU IN MY HOUSE AGAIN—IT WILL BE THE WORSE FOR YOU. GO!"

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# XVIII

## THE WIFE DECIDES

At Nora's unexpected action, her husband drew back. He found himself in an unfamiliar environment, and he did not know what to do.

Bradford had taken many risks in business, but when he did so, he knew just how far he could go; but here was a very different state of affairs! Yes, his wife would have to make the first move. That was certain.

He looked at her, but she still remained immovable, with her face hidden from him. He gazed at her stupidly, his hands hanging loosely down at his side. He did not know whether he ought to rush forward, take her in his arms, and try to comfort her, or wait.

He waited, and his thoughts rushed madly on. If she really did love this fellow, could he undo the mischief, or had it gone too far for that? He might be wrong, and to accuse his wife unjustly, would do more harm than good. Could he have

been mistaken, when he had almost caught them in each other's arms?

It did not seem possible! He was looking at the question from his accustomed, narrow point of view. He looked again at his wife, and hesitated.

Presently Nora uncovered her face, and sat bolt upright. Bradford saw with surprise that she had not been weeping, but that she was exceedingly pale, and that her face was absolutely expressionless.

"What do you wish to say to me?" she asked, in carefully modulated tones.

"I wish you would tell me what all this means!"

"What does what mean?"

"Everything. Nora, you know as well as I do, that we have not been getting on as well as we should—lately!"

"I am perfectly well aware of that," said Nora coolly; "whose fault is it? Yours—most decidedly yours!"

"That's not fair! Haven't I been good to you? Haven't I given you everything you asked for, yes, and more, too. Haven't I paid your bills without question? Haven't I allowed you to have what friends you wished—and haven't I permitted those same friends of yours to come and go as they pleased—to make a convenience of my house, with-

out a word of protest? Haven't I left you free to do your work? I can't for the life of me see what you have to complain of!"

"I don't suppose you could! Yes, you have done each and every one of these things, and I suppose I should thank you, but—I don't. I'll tell you why. I don't thank you for supporting me, because as I am your wife, you are bound by law to do so. I would not have thanked you if you had objected to my friends, for they never interfered with you, and —they amused me. I blame you for two things. First, your lack of sympathy in my chosen work. Second, for your lack of recognition of me, as the mother of your children."

"My dear wife! Can't you see that you are striking a false note, by talking in that way?"

"No! I am not. I have stood your neglect for years, and I must speak. You have been so buried in your business, that you have failed to see what was going on in your own house. You entered into your children's pleasures with zest, their interests meant everything to you—mine—nothing!"

"I thought I would only be in the way. If I had known!"

"That is a lie!" interrupted Nora hotly; "you never gave me or my work a thought—"

"Why did you ever marry me?"

"I wish I knew!" she said bitterly.

"Well, you did marry me, and—it's for better, or for worse—"

"I know the rest. Don't go on!"

"As you please, but, I want to show you why you are false to yourself, and by it, false to your work. Would not any woman who poses as being literary —well, who is literary, then—do everything she could to be left undisturbed? Wouldn't she be miserable if any one did disturb her? You don't answer. Well—it is so! When I am at work on some business proposition—one that requires both thought and concentration, I demand to be alone. As I understand it, those two lines of work are similar in that respect, and I think that my work, and the results I have obtained, have been more successful than yours just for that reason, because I have worked them out alone."

"That may be! But I don't suppose you would ever ask any one for help. You'd rather die. Your innate selfishness and conceit would preclude the possibility of that."

"The least we say about conceit and selfishness, the better! But one thing I do know, I wouldn't give a fig for a man who couldn't look after his own affairs himself—without help from any one else!"

"But I am a woman, and I am different. I demanded both sympathy and help, because I needed them. You gave me neither, but—I got both. Can you blame me for seeking them—elsewhere?"

"I blame myself for being so blind," said Bradford, sadly; "I'll try to do better, though—if you'll only give me the chance."

"I can not, and I'll tell you why. When Eliot was born, you gave all your love to the child—I counted for nothing!"

"Indeed! well—why shouldn't I have been proud to have a son—tell me that! Wasn't it what I had hoped and prayed for for years? You are making a mountain out of a mole-hill! If I did forget you for a moment, it was not intentional—I swear it! Yes, I did forget, and I am sorry. It was only human, after all!"

"It was a terrible mistake!"

"Why do you make that an issue? It is utterly ridiculous!" sneered he, and then, in a different tone; "you love your daughter, don't you?"

"Yes!" she said passionately; "I wonder if she will ever guess how much!"

"I wonder!" exclaimed Bradford, looking fixedly at his wife; but she avoided his eyes, and looked hastily away.

"You are cruel!" she cried, shrinking away from

him; "but I don't believe you know how much you are hurting me—"

"I hadn't the slightest idea of doing that. But, Nora, if the child doesn't love you, it's your own fault—you have never tried to win her—I don't believe you know how!"

"Hush!" she moaned; "you shouldn't have said that!"

"You are right. I am sorry. Ah! Nora, deep in my heart I love you—"

"It is too late for that!" And, thinking she recognized a false sentiment, rose to her feet, and confronted him, but he anticipated her.

"This situation must be ended!" he said, but Nora caught him up quickly.

"And I have decided to end it without delay!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—" and her cold, incisive tones wounded him to the quick; "that I am going away!"

"Are you going alone?" he asked breathlessly, for a horrible suspicion crossed his mind. He seized both her wrists as if in a vice, and tried to look into her eyes.

"No!" she answered briefly, and then; "let me go—you are hurting me!"

"Who is going with you?" he asked, as he released her, and he peered at her as if he were near-sighted.

"Wanda! You shall not prevent me from taking her with me—I shall take her—but—I leave you, Eliot! Good-bye!"

"Stop! why are you going?"

"Because I am not well!"

"That is not true!" he cried angrily; "you are going to meet Druce McAllister—deny it if you dare!"

"Before God! I do deny it!" she cried desperately; though she knew it was but half the truth, for she had made Druce promise her faithfully not to come to her, until she sent for him, until she should be free.

"But—what reason am I to give for your leaving? It's very sudden—very unexpected—I can't seem to grasp it, and people will talk—"

"You may be certain of that! Well—you may say that I am going West for my health. It is not a lie. It is true. The doctor advises a change; he says I may get over it."

"Nora, you are right to go away—this is a matter you must think out by yourself! When you return, we—" but he stopped speaking, and looked away. He did not know how to go on. He was a broken-hearted man.

When he raised his eyes again, he was alone.

# XIX

## THE DIVORCE MILL

NORA had been living in Reno for several months, and she realized that the time for her freedom was drawing near.

The necessary papers had been filed, and when the six months should have passed, she would still have to wait forty days, in case her husband should appear and file an objection, before her divorce could be made absolute. She was suing on the technical grounds of incompatibility of temper, and, in her petition, she asked for the custody of their daughter Wanda.

Not a word had passed between Nora and Bradford since their parting, though she had written to one or two friends, and corresponded frequently with Druce. His last letter to her was dated Philadelphia, but he wrote that he was making preparations to leave shortly for the West, and that he would establish himself in her neighborhood, that he might come to her at a moment's notice.

Nora wrote in reply, telling him the day he was

to join her in Nevada, and that she hoped all would go well!

How well she remembered the first few days after her arrival in this motley colony! How she had gone to a hotel, until she found a small cottage adapted to her needs!

In the beginning she had been too busy to think about anything, except the unpacking, and then, a number of small things had to be bought for the house. After these details had been attended to, there had been nothing else to do, so she found leisure to look about her, to see what the possibilities of her new residence and its surroundings offered.

What could she do to make the time pass? There seemed nothing to do but to wait. She knew no one in the place. She had no desire to make acquaintances.

She walked aimlessly about. She saw both the men and the women who were in Reno for the same purpose as herself, but she did not feel like making any advances towards them, lonely as she was. For after all, what were these people or their affairs to her?

She threw herself feverishly into her work, and for a few days, everything went smoothly. But she soon gave it up, because it made her homesick for Druce.

Her thoughts turned to Wanda. Now, that the child was removed from her father's influence, why should she not set about winning her? Yes, that would be a good plan, for, sooner or later, she felt in her inmost heart, that she would have to get closer to her daughter in some way, if she ever expected to gain her love and devotion.

To do this, she planned an hour of lessons in the morning, and took the child for a drive in the afternoon. The lessons, however, were not a success, for Nora knew she had no gift for teaching, and the child, in some subtle way, becoming aware of this, grew restless and fidgety, and ended by looking longingly at the door.

The mother was in despair, but, as yet, she would not acknowledge herself beaten, so she substituted a play hour for the lessons, and encouraged Wanda to bring her toys into the sitting-room. But Nora had no aptitude for such childish games, nor the ability to take the initiative, so the experiment was soon brought to a natural end.

The little girl was plainly more at home in her own play-room, and besides, Nora had neither the spirit nor the desire to make an effort to continue what had been a failure from the outset.

For a short time the drives were a success, but gradually, the novelty wore off, and the sameness

of these pilgrimages grew irksome, especially to the child. She often asked pointed questions, to which the mother evaded giving direct answers, and Wanda felt that something was being kept from her; wondered what it was. It was all so strange to her. But the strangest part of it all was, that her father never came home to play with her any more. In her childish way she tried to find out what it all meant, but of course she could not, and when night came, Janet put her to bed with a charming fairy story, and Wanda's baby troubles were forgotten for the moment.

Nora was disheartened, and the daily outings were given up. The child went out with Janet, while Nora found herself more and more in danger of becoming farther adrift than ever before, moreover, she was horribly lonely and dispirited.

In course of time, as her interest in this strange colony deepened, she softened toward it. She began to meditate and to draw conclusions.

It was entirely foreign to Nora to indulge in a spirit of self-questionings. But she did. Suddenly, she asked herself why she had come to this place! Had her conduct been altogether blameless? She evaded an answer to this last question, but she knew she had come to be free. Her heart exulted in the thought, for, when that time should come, she

would marry Druce McAllister, the man she loved!

She surprised herself by laughing. Yes, she would make friends—it did not seem to be a very difficult thing to do, and she would take an active part in the life of the colony!

As time passed, this new, gay life began to pall on her. There was nothing in it, because even to what had once been variety she had grown accustomed, so that it finally resembled the ceaseless grinding of some automatic tread-mill.

On the last morning, she sprang out of bed with fresh vigor. She was to be released from bondage that afternoon, and a song of happiness was singing in her heart! She continued to sing as she dressed, and a few minutes after, when Druce's letter came, she felt she could know no greater happiness. How near it brought him to her! The past seemed very far away, and—he was coming—he was coming!

She hugged Wanda to her, in her exuberance of spirits, until the little one cried, and then, when she tried to make up with her, she shrank from her mother, and burst into tears, for she could not understand what was the matter with her.

Under ordinary circumstances, the child's attitude would have angered her, for she was often impatient with her, but now, she was too happy

to give the matter more than a passing thought.

She went on singing through her packing, and when the trunks were brought down stairs, ready to be taken away, she thanked her stars that Bradford was but a memory, but that Druce McAllister was the man who would make her future happy forever!

At a quarter to three, her lawyer called for her. She greeted him gayly, and she felt she was treading on air. It was not until she reached the steps of the courthouse, that she suddenly paused.

A horrible thought entered her mind. She pressed her hand against her heart! Suppose her husband was waiting for her inside!

Just as quickly her mood changed. She shrugged her shoulders, and with a light laugh, ran forward.

The formalities were soon at an end. Almost before she knew it, she was again standing alone in the hall-way, with the decree of divorce in her hand, trying to make out its meaning. The ink on the paper was still wet, yet she could hardly grasp the fact that she was entirely free!

Tears stood in her eyes, and she held the sheet closer, for, somehow, she did not seem able to decipher the lines. Surely, it was growing darker. She held the paper nearer, and then, as if com-

pelled, looked up. A man was standing in the doorway. It was Druce!

She waved the paper at him, and, as he held out his arms to her, rushed forward.

"My darling! come—we have very little time!" he said, tensely; "we are to be married at once. It is all right. Come—hurry!"

# BOOK TWO

# THE REAPING

## I

### AN EARTHLY PARADISE

THAT afternoon Druce and Nora were married. He made all the arrangements, and she acquiesced, like a woman in a dream. It was not until she and her new husband were sitting side by side in the train bound for Santa Barbara that she awoke to the fact that they were really married. Even then it seemed too wonderful to be true.

"Wanda and Janet?" she suggested lazily, hardly caring for the moment what had become of them, she was so completely and supremely happy.

"Oh, I've made arangements for their comfort—you needn't worry about them—"

"Later on—I should like to see Wanda—not yet, though—"

"Yes, later on, but not now! This is my day—my hour!"

"Druce! Oh, my darling—my darling!"

"Nora, you really love me—tell me!"

"I love you, yes, my own—I have never known what it was to be truly happy before."

The train sped on, and the two sat holding each other's hands like young lovers. Nora looked out of the window from time to time, with a happy smile upon her face. What difference did it make where they were going, so that they would be together?

Trees, houses, hills and valleys flew by, and Nora looked at them almost as if they were unreal. Everything must be unreal except the present, everything—everything!

There were other people in the coach, but the lovers were unconscious of their presence.

"Dinner is now ready in the dining-car. First call for dinner!"

Druce looked annoyed, but Nora smiled back at the man.

"I do believe I am hungry, dear. Aren't you?"

"No," replied her husband, "it's only six o'clock. I couldn't possibly eat yet."

"Thank you!" responded Nora, "I suppose I should take that as a compliment. Popularly, we are expected to feed on love, but I am hungry, so come along, and—remember this is our wedding

breakfast. We mustn't keep the others waiting—we can imagine that they are our guests."

"I don't want any one but you, but—if you are hungry, we'll go in!"

"In a minute—I must see whether my hat is on straight—"

"Bother the hat!"

"Not much of a compliment, but—you are a dear!"

Nora would not have been Nora if she had not made a mental reservation even in the midst of her happiness. She could not help contrasting this second honeymoon with that other one when she and Bradford had made their first journey together. How perfect in one case where it had been sadly lacking in the other! Dear old Druce! How adorable he was, and how he loved her, and she him! She was thoroughly and absolutely content, more, she was at peace. There was nothing to jar, nothing to interfere, and she made up her mind that she had never truly loved before.

Here there was no differentiation of her love. She had entered this estate of matrimony with eyes wide open, without a thought that she might be condemned as for a fault. Not the faintest flutter that she might by the larger majority of right-thinking people be looked on as an outcast even passed her

by, for she cared neither for the opinion of the greater part nor for the minority, for she was a law unto herself. She flattered herself that she was above criticism or reproach.

Nothing mattered except that she clung to her happiness all the more desperately, it was so wonderful. She did not even stop to consider the ethics of her act, for she had sought and found content. Where the bee pauses to sip, there would she, without any other thought or desire save that Druce whom she adored should be by her side.

She was hungry even in the midst of her bliss, and she ate an exceedingly hearty meal, and so did her husband, though she concealed the amusement this sight gave her, for she feared to hurt his feelings. Another thing which gave her the greatest amount of delight was the fact that this great big husband of hers was evidently self-conscious. He resented the amused glances of the other people who were dining in the car, he looked haughtily at them, and in every movement, in every act showed the newly married man. Nora smiled inwardly, though with the feeling that this was no new thing for her, she had been married before, and she could look about her and see the humor of it all.

It was at this point that the shadow of the past

obtruded itself, and for the moment deflected her thoughts from the present. But it did not last long, this foreign and undutiful act of mind.

"I have dined well, dear—I couldn't eat another thing if I tried, could you?"

"No, darling, I couldn't—I didn't know I was hungry—I suppose I was too excited to realize it."

Druce paid the check, and they returned to their compartment.

"The smoke afterward is the best part of the meal," exclaimed McAllister, as he handed Nora a cigarette, and blew out a cloud of smoke, and then he took her in his arms.

"Better than that?" queried the wife.

"No, a thousand times no! Nothing could be better than that. Nora! do you realize that we are man and wife?"

"I'm trying to—but, I can't yet, can you?"

"No, I can't—please pinch me, and see whether I am awake!"

"I'd rather kiss you, my own dear husband—"

"A blow from you would be a caress—"

"Naughty boy! What a flatterer you are!"

"No, I am not—I mean every word I say. Don't you believe me?"

"Yes, of course, I do—I really do!"

"You are adorable—you are divine! I love

you—I love you—I shall always love you."

Nora puffed away in silence for a space. His words made her thoughtful. Would he always love her as he was doing at this moment? Then a feeling of remorse seized her, but she dismissed the thought as unworthy. Of course, he would love her always. She would be his, and he hers forever!

So began this dream journey! The image of Druce would be graven on her heart, sleeping and waking, from this day until the end. The feeling of unreality continued for many a long day, and the woman dreamed that she was happy, that she had gained her heart's desire, and she laughed to keep back the tears of joy from falling.

Her life held all that she had prayed for, all that it seemed possible for it to contain.

"Druce!" she said on the last day before they arrived at their journey's end; "where are we going?"

"To Santa Barbara, of course. I thought you knew that."

"Oh, yes, I knew that—but, I mean where are we going to live—not in a hotel—"

"Silly child! no. I have taken a little house. It is almost buried in flowers—"

"Love among the flowers! Ah, Druce, you are making me too happy."

"How you take the words out of my mouth! I was just going to say that!"

"You dear!"

The train slowed up for the last time, and Nora rose to her feet. The parcels and packages were gathered up, and the first station of their journey came to an end.

They alighted from the coach, which had been their home for the last three days, and walked along the platform.

Their carriage drive took them through many charming streets and squares. Nora looked about her with increasing interest. So this was where she was going to live. This was where she and Druce were going to be happy together. She strove to familiarize herself with her surroundings, as they passed along, but she could not. It was too much of an effort. She did not wish to make an effort just yet. She preferred to dream, just to dream, that was all, for the present.

She knew what the dream was like, but she did not wish to thrust aside the veil of clouds and see the sun face to face. It was not that she feared, but she was too happy, and she felt she could not bear its brightness for some time to come.

The carriage was turning in at an old-fashioned gateway, almost smothered in blossoms, and beyond

Nora caught a glimpse of a cottage fairly buried beneath the weight of its sweet-scented burden. She gave a great gasp of surprise, and her eyes filled with tears of happiness.

"Oh, my darling, is this our home? I am too happy—it is too much—you are so good—so good!"

For a moment she recoiled. She feared she had tempted fate. Then she turned, and meeting her husband's smiling eye, hid her face on his shoulder.

The next moment he was helping her to alight. Then he was offering her a chair, and she heard his voice calling out:

"Bring the tea out here—Mrs. McAllister is tired."

She sighed softly, and closed her eyes.

It was only a dream after all. It could not be anything else!

A lovely purple light was in the west. It is the light of love, she thought, as she looked at the after-glow through half-closed lids.

"Just put the tray down on the table—we shall want nothing else for the present."

And at the sound of the voice she loved, she smiled divinely.

She made sure that they were alone, then she spoke.

"We are going to be very happy—my own dear love."

"Yes," he echoed, "very happy!"

And he tried to fathom the expression in those eyes that held him, but he could not.

"My wife!" he murmured softly; "my wife!"

Why try to understand? What difference did it make?

## II

### LOVE AND MARRIAGE

THE honeymoon was waning, and Druce and Nora were again sitting in the gloaming.

"Druce! I have been perfectly happy—what day is to-day?"

"It's the day after yesterday, and to-morrow will soon be here."

"Is that the way you feel about it?"

"Yes, of course, don't you?"

"I was wondering—"

"What, dear?"

"Whether—that is—if you loved me as much as at first."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't know, but men are so different from women. Do you really love me best of all?"

"You know I do, besides, there's no one else I could love."

"Could there be any one else—am I not enough? Are you tired of me already? Druce!"

"No, my darling, I am not tired of you—why,

how could I be? You are so literal—so exact. Love is not like that. It is a fever—a dream—insanity, if you will."

"Love, yes, but not marriage."

"What do you mean? You say that men are not the same as women in love, and then, you draw a distinction between love and marriage."

"And I mean it—about men."

"But what about the rest of it?"

"Ah! love is madness—it cannot be stable. It is an existence—ideal—irresponsible, but—marriage is different—quite different—quite different."

"In what way?"

"In marriage one does not lose one's head—at least one is not supposed to—"

"Then—love and marriage are separate?"

"Love is a thing apart, but marriage is an estate—"

"Not to be entered into lightly or unadvisedly—"

"It would be impossible to do that, but in marriage one feels more secure—whereas love knows no laws."

"Is there no love in marriage? Don't we love each other?"

"Of course there is love in marriage, but it is not the same kind of love as the other."

"I don't feel like contemplating that sort of thing

yet. I want madness—I don't want to be kept in bounds —I want freedom!"

"That's because you are a man—because you have a man's way of looking at love—at life."

"You say that because you are a woman, and the dearest of your charming sex."

"Yet one must be sane in love, if it is to last."

"How can one be sane in love? It is a paradox."

"One can be sane in love, but not in passion. There is the great, the basic difference. Our love is ideal, and not temporary."

"Nora! I can't see what you are driving at, and, my dear, little woman, what is the use of discussing these intricate phases of love? Not now, at least. I frankly confess, I haven't the slightest interest where I am going, or what I'm doing, except that I'm loving you—you whom I adore—"

"Ah! if I lost your love, it would kill me!"

"There's no danger—"

"Is it because you do love me, or because I happen to be a woman who is—on the spot?"

"I don't understand you."

"Do I satisfy your ideal of what you hoped I would be?"

"Nora, what are you driving at?"

"Nothing in particular, but—I am frightfully jealous, did you know that? I am tenacious of my

own, and I want you—for myself—alone. I want to go on loving you. I want you to go on loving me until the end."

"Don't worry about that, if that's what's bothering you."

"As long as we both shall live. Druce, we must be together. Dear one, promise me!"

"How foolish you are! Why should we not be together? come, what's at the back of your head? Out with it!"

"Only this, my own, dear husband. In great happiness, as in every other crisis, there's sure to be a reaction. If our love is not founded on a sure and solid foundation, it will fall like a ruin about us. I think we know where we stand, but it does no harm, to look about us, even in the midst of our joy."

"You speak as if you were uncertain."

"No, it is not that. I was only imagining the worst, in order to realize more fully the perfection of the present. I live like you in the present, but unlike you, I am on the lookout for quicksands—not that they really exist, you understand, but—just to be ready. That is all. You mustn't think too much about what I've said. Women are full of fancies, whimsical—hardly understanding themselves—I was only supposing, you see, but—now

I'm quite satisfied. Ah! I am happy—so happy!"

Nora with all her faults, her charm, her contrasts, was only a woman after all. For days she had been content to drift. The past was ugly. She thrust it behind her, and turned her face resolutely away, for this new love meant so much to her.

She had often dreamed of just such a charmed existence, and surely it was all a dream still.

What was it that had happened? Why, she had given up unhappiness to find happiness, but she could not bear to lose it, now that it was once hers. She had been playing a game, when she had questioned Druce as she had done, for she felt that she must test him, and strive to satisfy herself as to his sincerity. If she should make a mistake, what would it cost her to lose him and love! It would be unbearable!

She was convinced that she had never loved Bradford, also that he had never loved her. It was therefore easy to dismiss him into the recesses of the shadowy past. If there had been any love between them, she might have been content to say that she had lost him, but no, she had cheerfully thrown him carelessly and heedlessly aside. Now with this new happiness enveloping and absorbing her being, she strove to forget all that had gone before.

Curiosity alone had made her do this, but fearing she might have shown her hand too plainly, she had paused and smiled at him. Though he was mystified, he accepted her mood as one that was purely feminine, and therefore incomprehensible.

"At present, love is to you—all," she said softly. "I should like it to be so, but it always seems you are afraid to pause and look about you—"

"Why should I pause? What is there to find? I want nothing but you—you."

Nora gazed at him, smiling wistfully, but said nothing. It was more prudent to remain silent. Her fears were personal. He would not understand them. Her qualms might only serve to disconcert and unsettle him, for he could not see with her eyes. Yes, it was best to live in the present, after all. There was no danger there. None at all. Besides, she could see where they both were going, provided she kept her eyes wide open, while he could see nothing but her for the moment. How long she would hold full sway over him, she could not foretell. That was still in the clouds. But why worry, when there was nothing to worry about?

His voice roused her from her day-dream. She looked up expectantly.

"What do you mean by saying that love is all

to me now?" And she was startled, though she smiled.

"I mean that you are so completely under its power that you consider nothing else. You are enthralled. You cannot think of anything else. You are like a man in a dream. When will you wake?"

"Why should I wish to wake? My dream is one of bliss."

"I love you just as much. But yours is a man's way. You are carried off your feet. You are like one who is under a spell. You cannot think of anything but me. I have awakened first to reality. I had forgotten everything but you. I remember now that I have a daughter. I have a duty to perform. I must win her love, too. I must do everything to win her to me. It is my right."

"You are satisfied, then. You say you have been living in a dream. You say you are awake. That you waked first. You speak of a need—a duty. Am I not to be all in all to you?"

"You are my love—my desire, but my child's love I must possess too. You cannot understand how I can bear the burden of two loves. It is because they are different, that I can divorce them. You cannot do this, and I thank God you cannot. I am all the more sure of you—of your love—of your care—"

"Nora, I wish you would stop this kind of talk.

I suppose you know what you are talking about, but——"

"It is only that I love you so much that I could not bear to know any different existence."

"I guess we both feel the same about that, but as I said before, love is enough for me, and I want to go on dreaming—"

"Yes, you shall, dear, but Wanda is coming to-morrow, and I must get ready for her. Tell me you are not jealous of her! You won't grudge me her love, if she will only give it me. You won't let that change anything between us. Everything will go on just the same, won't it? I'm sure it will. It won't be my fault if it don't. You'll be to blame. You know you will, you dear!"

In answer, he took her in his arms, and kissed her.

"Ah! dear one, I love you too much!"

And she sped away from him, for she was overwhelmed with joy.

## III

### NEWS FROM HOME

THE following morning there came a letter from Sheeda. It had been forwarded from Reno. She opened and read it eagerly. What memories it evoked, memories that she had fancied dead or forgotten! For the first time, she realized that she had left friends behind. How far away it all seemed, that other life! Incidents long forgotten, came back with startling clearness. Conversations she had had with Sheeda, with Mrs. Wayne and others. How it had annoyed her to have Mrs. Wayne criticize Sheeda, because she herself had not agreed with her view!

Dear Sheeda! It had been a wrench to part from her. Had she not stood by and defended, advised and comforted her? She had been the most reasonable, the most sensible of them all. Nora did not realize that this was so, because Sheeda had merely voiced her own sentiments. She told Nora what she wanted to hear, but Nora was too self-centered to

know this. She thought Sheeda believed in herself, which she did, and that she was sincere, which she also was, but the point of view was at fault, of which neither of the women was aware at the time. That was the basic mistake. It had made very little difference, though, for Nora was destined to tread a certain preordained path, and the stimulus of her friend had been but a slight determining factor; but it had comforted her to feel that another was in sympathy with her. If Sheeda had opposed herself to Nora, the latter would have believed she was not sincere, sympathetic, or that she had not proved herself the real friend she had been seeking.

One piece of news distressed Nora. Sheeda wrote that she was not well. There was nothing the matter, nothing definite, at least. She had had a good deal of rheumatism in her arm, and felt out of sorts. The doctors had failed to help her, and she was frightfully depressed. She had begun to lose her color, and was much thinner, but of course, all these disagreeable symptoms would disappear when she began to feel better. Tennis was left, and walking, but she tired so easily, that she had to rest a good deal. It was a bore not to feel well, and she was determined not to give in, as long as there was nothing definite the matter with her.

Mrs. Wayne was not getting on well with her

husband. Nothing serious, though. He had been drinking, and was rather attentive to Faith Carter, who was evidently awake after a long sleep, and beginning to take notice. Her husband, that stupid Malcolm was away from home a great deal, on business. Business! Mary and Edith were not speaking. Some family row, and the Blatchfords were spending a great deal more money than they were credited with. The Middletons were entertaining huge parties, and where the money comes from, no one knew.

Bradford was going abroad. His son seemed to have outgrown his strength. He lived for the boy. He never speaks of you. He seems happy, but is changed. Much quieter, and went nowhere. He was living the life of a hermit, but was supposed to be making mints of money, and still wrapped up in his work. Sheeda wrote that she had seen him to speak to only once, and he seemed subdued. Many say he had been in love with his wife. Sheeda supposed that Nora would not be especially interested in such gossip, when he no longer belonged to her. How was Druce? Was he a success? Why did she not write? Surely they were or had been friends.

Was their friendship to come to an end, just because Nora was away, and had a new husband?

That would be a poor kind of friendship. Sheeda supposed Nora would not come east for a long time. Why should she? She had a new home, and she should be happy. If she had not been utterly contented, Sheeda was certain she would have written. She wished to be remembered to Druce. She had always liked him. He was clever. He had probably not thought of architecture since they were married. Don't let him give it up! She must be a real help-meet.

What about her own work? She must have been too busy loving her new husband for that. She was like a young girl, and Druce like a young man with a bad case of calf love. How ridiculous, but how absolutely perfect! Was she happy, or was the honeymoon beginning to wane? Was the gilt off the gingerbread, and had she found her idol had only feet of clay after all? People can have feet of clay, and still be very nice, so don't take her too literally.

She said she intended to use the very faintest, almost the shadow of a figure of speech. Figures of speech should be applied with a very fine camel's hair brush to be effective. She was awfully fond of Nora, and would Nora please answer all her questions, for the writer stated that she hated to be exact, but Nora would know and understand.

Jim Truxton was to buy a house at Devon. It must mean that he was going to be married at last.

Nora folded the letter carefully. She would answer it, when she had time. At present, she had so much to do, getting ready for her child. Dear little Wanda! she must have everything to make her contented, and Nora busied herself with getting the child's room ready.

Into the midst of this picture of loving duty came Druce. Nora rushed at him, and threw her arms about his neck.

"Do you like it? Do you think Wanda will be happy here? Is there anything you can suggest?"

Nora looked at her husband, as he surveyed the room critically. How fresh and young he looked in his grey flannels, and immaculate white shoes! He was very good to look at, she thought, but only a boy, with his curly hair, and his mobile mouth. His face had latent strength, though, and perhaps determination. Yes, Sheeda was right, at least she hoped so, and that Druce would go far one day.

"It's very dainty and nice," he said at last. "Where did you get that chintz? It must be English. I never saw such a pretty shade of grey, and such a soft carpet. No, I can't suggest a thing. It is quite perfect as it is."

"Don't you think I have managed the dormer

window cleverly?" she asked, looking at him tenderly.

"Yes," he answered; "but where did you ever get the idea of hanging a curtain that way? It is the most original thing I have ever seen. You are a witch, and I love you. Not because you are a witch, but because, my darling, you are you!"

It was almost time for Wanda to arrive, and she confessed that she felt nervous about the meeting.

"What time does the train get in? You sent the carriage to meet her, didn't you? Oh, Druce, she ought to be here soon!"

"Yes, I made all the arrangements. By Jove! it's almost twelve o'clock. I had no idea it was so late."

"We must hurry. I want to be there when she arrives. I couldn't bear to go to the station, though, I was afraid—"

"Why? It would have seemed more natural."

"Yes, I know, but, you see, I haven't told her about you—"

"By George! you haven't? Well, she'll just have to accept me, I guess."

"It's going to be hard to explain. I never thought about it before. I've been too busy—loving

you, dear. I wonder when I began. Long ago, I'm afraid. Long before I was aware of it. Druce, dear, do you love me—do you?"

"Yes," he answered passionately; "but, I wonder if you know how much!"

They walked on, his arm about her, while she looked lovingly up at him. Slowly they descended the broad stairway, and then with a start, she broke away from him.

"I thought I heard a carriage coming. Oh, Druce! if it should be my Wanda? What am I to say to her? How explain? What am I to do? You stay here, inside, within call, and I'll go out to meet her. Please!"

"All right!"

Nora made her way to the verandah, and shading her eyes from the sun, scanned the driveway. Nothing was in sight. She stood there motionless, though her heart was beating wildly.

She could not banish from her mind home pictures from the past. She shrank back, for there was cruelty and mockery in them.

Two children were playing on the floor of a nursery. She, the mother sat apart, solitary and sad. She did not know how to join them in their games. She could not help them to enjoy themselves. She could not decide when disputes arose,

because she did not know what to say, to do, and she felt that the children did not love her. She was there, but they had forgotten her. Would it always be so? The little son was not well, and now her daughter was coming home.

How would she be greeted by her? Would any love for her be shown by the child, or would she speak to her like a stranger, hang back shyly, and turn to the nurse, Janet, who had been her companion for so many years? Why had not she, the mother, taken a more intimate interest in her children? Why had not she been the companion? It had been a fatal mistake, but perhaps it was not too late to recover lost ground, and win her way into one child's heart.

The carriage was making its way along the drive. It seemed to crawl, it approached so slowly. Nora took a step forward, her hand on her heart, as she checked the glad cry which sprang unbidden to her lips. In the carriage were seated a little girl of ten years, and beside her a grim, sour-faced guardian in black.

"It is my Wanda!" murmured the mother, but she seemed to shrink back imperceptibly as the carriage drew up to the steps.

The little girl descended, and looked around at her nurse, as if she were confused.

"Go and kiss your mother, child, don't you see she's waiting for you?"

Wanda obeyed, and went forward, until she was on a level with the mother, who was afraid to clasp her in her arms. It was then that the little one caught sight of Druce, who was standing in the doorway with a rather amused expression on his face. Her face began to pucker and she rushed away with a cry to Janet.

The old woman caught her up and petted her, soothing her with endearing words.

"She'll be all right in a minute. It's only that she's afraid of strangers."

Nora, who had forgotten that Druce was just behind her, thought the words applied to her, and shrank back with a moan.

Druce sprang forward and took her in his arms.

"She meant me, dear, not you," he said gently.

"Yes, of course, I know, but, my darling, didn't you see, she—never—kissed me—oh, Druce!"

"Never mind, dear Nora, perhaps she was frightened, or tired. It's a hot journey here from Los Angeles. You attach too much importance to the incident."

Wanda, prompted by Janet, spoke to her mother, who turned toward her eagerly, hungrily.

"How are you, mother? I'll kiss you, if—you will tell me who—that man—is!"

But Nora could not speak much as she wished to, she was too nervous, and she stared at her daughter with a feeling of terror, so the child with a whimper ran back to her nurse.

"Take him away! He's making fun of me. I don't like him. I want my daddy!" she screamed hysterically.

"For shame, Miss Wanda, after your promise to be good! Oh, ma'am! I'm sorry she's carrying on so bad—"

But Nora did not hear, for she had hurried into the house, and up to her room, where she sat stiffly on the edge of the bed, a mutinous and dry-eyed figure of misery.

"I'll make her love me!" she said desperately at last.

# IV

## WANDA MAKES A FRIEND IN DRUCE

"CAN I come in, ma'am?"

It was Janet's voice, and Nora bade her enter.

"I'm sorry Miss Wanda should have behaved in such a silly way, just when you were looking forward to her coming, and all that. It upset you, I can well see—"

"It's a matter of no consequence," answered Mrs. McAllister, springing up, and trying to speak casually.

"But it is," persisted the old woman. "It's a reflection on the way I've brought her up—"

"It's a judgment on me from heaven for not having done my duty. I've been at fault, and I'm being punished. I do so wish her to love me—"

"And she will, if you only have patience. She's a moody child, and she takes strong likes and dislikes—"

"To my husband, you mean?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking—yes. But don't

you be worriting, ma'am, she'll come round. It's knowing how to take her, that's all."

"And that's what I've never known how to do—"

"You've never set your mind on it. You see, there's only one way to get at a child, and that's to go easy. You can't drive them, for they'll be up against you at once, and you don't get no furtherer."

"I suppose so, but, Janet, I need her love. I must have it. She's getting too old to be entirely under your care. Besides, it's my place to see to her education, her pleasures—"

"Yes, it is, ma'am, and I'm glad to hear you say so. You see, before, you were taken up with your scribbling, and there was no one else."

"Except her—father!"

"It's not my place to blame you for what you thought best to do, ma'am, but he did have the taking way with children. They looked for him, and he knew just what to do—"

"Hush! don't go on! That's over and done with."

"I beg pardon, and—I do hope you are happy. I've lived a long time with you, but I wouldn't presume—"

"No, of course not—you're not the gossiping kind. I understand. Yes, I'm happy—happier than

I've ever been in my life. I'd be happier still, if only Wanda—"

"Oh! she'll come round to you in the end, only it's natural that she should feel a little strange-like at first—"

"Yes—yes!" exclaimed Nora in a stifled voice, "but now go! Wait, does the child like her room? Is it like home to her? Has she said anything about it? Is she going to be happy here?"

"Why, she's crazy about everything. She's been running about the room, fingering things, and cooing with pleasure. Oh, it'll be home for her all right. I'll get her toys out, and that's all she needs to keep her happy."

"I wish you would let me do that, when the trunks come," asked the mother wistfully. "It might make a difference—it'll be a start, and everything depends on making a good beginning—impression, you know."

"That it does, ma'am."

"Very well, now go down to your dinner! It ought to be ready. Where is the child?"

"You'd never believe it, but she's with Mr. McAllister."

"She likes him then—oh! it's going to make it easier for me. Does she know who he is?"

"No, ma'am, she thinks it a guest he is. The

news ought to be told to her, but it'll break her heart it will, for she's rare fond of her father, and that's the truth."

"It is natural! Now go!"

"Yes'm, but I wish to say one thing. I've served you faithful, but if the child asks me questions, I'll have to answer them. I don't want you to think I'm working against you, but—you can't fool a child, and that's flat!"

When the door closed, and Nora was alone again, she gazed about her as if bewildered. Then, impulsively she went over to her writing desk, and pulling out a sheet of paper, began a letter to Sheeda. She must pour out her heart to some one, and Sheeda would understand. She had been so happy, and now here was the first faint rift in the lute. But, perhaps, she was exaggerating. God grant that she was!

"Dearest Sheeda:—

Thank you so much for your letter and the news it brought me. I am so sorry you are not well. Do, please, take good care of yourself, and let me know how you get on! Your letter was like a breath from the past, the pleasant part, and it cheered me to hear all about the people at home. I am glad Brad-

ford is more human. Perhaps the lesson was good for him. I hope he will profit by the experience. I don't believe I am frantically interested in him, but I bear him no ill-will. It was his misfortune, not his fault that we could not get on. He never understood me, but now I am the very happiest mortal on this earth, for I have Druce. Wanda has come, but it is the same old story. She has been too much with Janet, and I, because I thought the child did not love me, did not take enough trouble to win her in the beginning. This is the only thing that makes me unhappy, though, perhaps, it can be remedied, but it is going to be hard work. It needs patience and tact. Sheeda! I too have changed. I am softer, more human, and, my dear, it is love that has wrought this miracle, I am convinced. I have not done any literary work, for I haven't had time. Besides, Druce is too dear, and I love him with my whole heart, mind and soul.

Thank you for the letters of introduction. I am sure they will be invaluable. It was like you to send them. I wish to make a start here, and sooner or later Druce will wish to make some friends. I don't think the first blush of our happiness can ever return in all its glory,

once it has faded, for then the madness of those first days will calm down into the sanity of married love. Good-bye, and write soon again.

Your loving
NORA."

From her window she looked down on the stretch of lawn in front of the house, and an amazing sight met her eye. In and out of the shrubbery ran two figures. Her husband and her daughter. Both were laughing merrily.

When she descended the stairs, she paused on the verandah to watch unobserved the game of hide-and-seek, which still continued with unabated vigor.

Druce, happening to look up, caught his wife's eye, and smiled. Wanda, following his glance, met her mother's eye, but she did not respond to the wistfulness in it. She stood there with a frown on her face, because her fun had been interfered with.

"Haven't you anything to say to me, dear child? I am your mother, you know."

"Yes, I know," replied the child, with a peculiar smile, "but why do you come and break up our game? We were having such fun. You always do things of that sort."

"Don't speak to me like that! Your manners are

very bad. I shall have to take you in hand. We must begin lessons soon. You don't wish to grow up to be an ignorant little girl, do you? Come, tell me you are sorry for your bad behavior!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be bad. I was afraid of the man. I like him now. He's bully! He plays games finely."

"Does he, well, I am glad. Come, kiss me, now! I insist."

The child obeyed, and then stood awkwardly by her mother.

"Don't you love me, Wanda?" inquired Nora anxiously.

"Yes, but something inside me keeps it in. He's gone!"

"Never mind him! Do you know who he is?" asked Nora suddenly.

"No, but I like him!"

"He is to be your new father—" hastily.

"Oh, mother, you're joking! Why, could I have a new father, while my own dear daddy is alive? I wish he would come back to us."

"He is not coming back," said Nora slowly; "I hope you will love me as much as you did him."

"Not coming back!" inquired Wanda, as if she could not take in the meaning of the words; "not coming back?" she repeated in a lighter tone. "Do

you know I thought for a moment you were in earnest? I think I like being with you. You are so full of jokes."

"Listen, child, do you love me?"

"All little girls love their mothers, so Janet says, but to tell the truth I don't know you very well—not as well as my nurse. I have always been with her, or—daddy."

Nora looked at the child with wide open eyes. Did she know what she was saying? Was she trying to wound her? It could not be! These references to the man who had gone out of her life must cease, but she could not close the child's mouth without hurting her. She could not, she must not do that. Was this to be one of the crosses she would have to bear?

Why should she have to bear a cross? What had she done to make that necessary? The law had freed her from a man she did not love, and she had married the one man she loved. Surely, there could be nothing wrong in that. Not according to the present standard of the world's opinion. There had been a time when a divorced woman was spurned as one accursed, but people were becoming more enlightened. The public had to be educated, that was all! At this thought, she laughed.

"What is it—another one of those funny jokes, mother?"

"No, dear; but now run along, there is Janet looking for you. Wanda, my child, before you go, I want to ask you to try and love me. You don't know how much I—need you. You will love me, won't you, darling?"

"Of course, I'll try, if you want me to, but I can't promise to make a success of it just at first. But—I'll do my best. I can't do better than that. Can I, mother?"

"No—of course not!" replied Nora, very quietly, and the child evidently satisfied that she had done her duty, ran off with a merry shout to join her nurse.

"Janet, dear Janet! I'm coming. Wait for me!"

The poor mother turned a shade whiter as she heard the ring of sincerity in her daughter's voice, and looked up to meet Druce's eye fixed on her questioningly.

"What is the matter, my dear? Is it Wanda? Haven't you made much headway, or has she unconsciously been telling you some hometruths?"

"Nothing is the matter," answered Nora steadily; "it's only that I have a headache. I may be hungry."

"I thought you looked a little pale. Well, lun-

cheon is ready now. I've no doubt the child's arrival has upset you—"

"Oh, dear no! Why should it? I'm not quite as sensitive as that!"

But she turned her head away and pressed her palm against her throat. She was lying, but she did not wish him to know it. There must be nothing but honesty between them.

"You'll lie down before tea, won't you, dear?"

"No, I won't do that. A little walk will do me good. Sheeda sent me some letters of introduction." She held them out to him to read. "Mrs. Jimmie Ashton, Mrs. Alfred Dorian, and Miss Hargreaves. I think the Ashton woman sounds promising. I think I'll go there."

Druce looked at her earnestly as she passed him with bent head, and frowned. As she reached the steps, she turned and forced a smile.

Druce looked relieved, and followed her into the house.

## V

### A WOMAN OF THE WORLD

Mrs. Ashton was at home, and proved to be a charming woman of the world. Nora was at once in complete sympathy with her.

"If you hadn't come to-day," remarked Ethel Ashton; "I should have waived all ceremony, and have looked you up. Sheeda wrote me about you, and I have been very anxious to meet you ever since reading her letter."

"Did she tell you I had been divorced, and had remarried immediately after I got my decree?"

"Yes, she did mention it," assented Mrs. Ashton lazily; "but it was quite unnecessary, for when one's private life becomes public property, it is impossible to travel incognito."

"I hope you do not mean that unkindly—"

"Oh, dear no! I never have any—ulterior motive, as the novelists—the yellow ones—put it, and I am painfully frank. I have a host of friends—acquaintances, I mean—and I treat them all alike.

I give advice, when asked, and one may take it or leave it, as one pleases. I discuss people's most private affairs with them, but I never presume to interfere unless I am consulted. I am the human sympathy account, and I have no doubt you will come to me when you are in trouble, just as the others have done. One good thing about me is that I am safe as the grave, and therefore respect a confidence. I am a sort of mother confessor to society. If you knew all that I did, you could break up as many homes as you would wish, without a strain. It would be too easy to make it interesting, though, but I don't believe you're that sort, are you?"

"No, I am not, but why do you ask?"

"Well, in the first place you are a problem—every new arrival is—you have been given to me by a mutual friend, and I am proving you, just like any algebraic problem, that is all."

"Do I come up to the standard?"

"It is not a question of standard—it is a question of proportion—"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"What you are to the rest of the world as I am to some one else. Do you see? It isn't a thing that one can explain—one must just see it—like family expressions. It spoils them to attempt explanation. Now, do you understand?"

"Yes, I suppose every one has his or her place. I never thought of it before."

"Of course—you're clever to have seen that so quickly. I'm sure we shall get on famously. I think your husband knows my husband, Mrs. McAllister—"

"Where did they meet? I had no idea they were friends. That should make a fresh bond of sympathy between us. I hope you approve of me, and are going to like me."

"I like you better than I thought I should. But, you forget I do not know you very well yet. I only know you superficially. After you have shown me your real self, I shall be better able to judge. I don't know what you mean by a fresh bond of sympathy. Just because our husbands are friends? Husbands really count for very little now-a-days, unless they belong to some other woman, and I shouldn't dare to have a flirtation with your husband until I knew you better."

Nora laughed, for the humor of all this was delightfully infectious.

"I really don't care for serious flirtations, unless there's something to be gained by them. In most cases a flirtation that means nothing is so much more amusing, for it requires no strain, that is, if the man knows the game well."

Nora was trying to study her new-made friend, but she presented so many sides, and ran ahead so fast, that it was all she could do to obtain more than a fleeting glance of a series of brilliant pictures.

"I like you so much—" she began, laughing in a breathless sort of way.

"That is very nice, because I think I see a great deal in you to like. I don't usually go so far at a first interview; still, have a care, for being a woman, I sometimes change my mind."

Really, thought Nora, what a delightfully refreshing woman this was!

"You're original, but you're only beginning to find yourself. You've had experience, but you haven't learnt much by it. That will come—by and by. This is the first time you have had the opportunity to digest all that you have taken in in the past. You have lived fast, and you hardly realize all that's happened. You will have to have your eyes opened, and sometimes, that hurts. That's a different kind of experience, and the sort that counts."

"Do you mean that I'll have to be unhappy?"

"You may or may not be unhappy, but, sooner or later, you must come to a full realization of life. You must self examine yourself, in order to learn the truth about yourself. You must find out where

you belong in the scheme of things, if you really want to make a success of yourself, socially or otherwise."

"That sounds like a novel—"

"And yet, one does read sense in books sometimes. But I read from life. I find it more trustworthy. No offence to the novelists, though. They have to feel superior to the rest of us, or else, they would lose confidence in themselves. They wouldn't be able to write anything worth while. Then again, they have to lay it on with a very thick brush, or no one would understand what they were driving at. Sometimes they are in danger of using too fine a brush, but—I'm getting too near the danger mark, and besides, we're talking about real people, not things."

"You're very original and entertaining!"

"Am I? Well, you are very attractive, and very feminine, which appeals or should appeal tremendously to men. I suppose you are frightfully in love with your husband, and inordinately happy!"

"Yes, I am happy, and—I would be the happiest woman in the world, if—but I will not bore you with my own affairs—"

"It won't bore me at all. It will help me to know you better, if you care to speak out about anything that troubles you—isn't your husband turning out

satisfactorily? Men are often like that. Before marriage—after marriage! I know them well."

"It's not that. Druce is a dear, and we love each other dearly. It's my daughter—not his—she's ten, and—I—she—"

"I understand," said Ethel gently; " you and she are not in accord. Let me tell you more. I know these cases so well. She has been taken care of by a nurse—"

"But how did you know all this? It's all true, and—she speaks of her father—all the time. I cannot bear it—"

"As ye sow, so shall ye reap!"

"Yes, I suppose that is true, but—how can I ever get the child to love me—to give me her confidence? It is not right that a servant should take my place."

"There's no use in railing against what is your own fault. You didn't begin right with the child. You didn't realize that you should have taken your proper place in the beginning. Forgive me for speaking so plainly. It's the only way, if I am to help you. Again, you can't get away from disagreeable things by pretending they don't exist. That's nonsense!"

"What must I do to retrieve my error?"

"You must have patience. Everything will come right, if you go slowly. Of course, there will be

disappointments, but go ahead, and don't mind them! You must learn to be above such things. I suppose you find it hard to manage children—to get in touch with them. Some people have the gift naturally. You are evidently not one of those people. That makes it doubly hard. But the prize is worth working for. You have no other children?"

"Yes," interrupted Nora, "I have—a son, and—I have never told a soul this—I don't know why I'm telling you—I would give my life's blood to see him for one minute—to clasp him to my heart—"

"Thank you. I appreciate your trust. You have the mother feeling—you love your children—you are in no danger—it will save you—" But she paused abruptly, for she had been speaking her thoughts aloud.

"I love my son—it is the same old story. My children hold me in contempt. My daughter is with me. The law gave her to me, but—the other—my son is with his father."

"God gave you both children. You and the law have taken one away."

"Hush! for God's sake. It's true, but I won't listen."

"You must listen. You can't get away from it.

It's like love. Once it takes hold of you, you are blind. You can't fight against it. This other kind of love—the mother love—is just as strong—even if it is different. I know what I'm talking about."

"You do indeed, but many things are true, and just because they are part of the obvious things of life, we don't stop to think of or even consider them."

"Things one is accustomed to—people more than things—still have variety—"

"Yes, that's true too, but if it weren't for Druce, I couldn't endure many things I am forced to accept. Men are different from women. You understand. They are more brutal. They love and forget. We love and—do not forget. We remember —all the time."

"I am so glad you are speaking out your heart to me. It makes me know that you consider me a real friend. It does lots of good to unburden one's self."

"It does, it has, but—I am ashamed of myself. It's only my first visit, and I have been talking to you as if I had known you all my life."

"That's a great compliment, but—won't you have some tea? I'm forgetting my duties of hostess—"

"No, I thank you, and I must really go. I have one or two calls to make. I am only beginning to

take up my social life again. I have been dreaming all these weeks, and I had forgotten all the other things that hurt—that I know must be faced sooner or later."

"Yes, and where are you bound now?"

"I'm going to see whether I shall find Miss Jessica Hargreaves at home."

"I do hope you will, for she's a character. She'll rake you over the coals. But you mustn't mind, for she's an old fraud, good heart and all that, but she is as gay as they make them, even out here. Drinks like a toper, and talks morality like a parson, but she's not really insincere. It's just her way, and you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"Indeed you can't. Well, good-bye. Do come and see me soon. We have the Carson house, you know."

"Yes, I know. This is a small place. Everybody knows everything about one's neighbors. There's no concealment, but we have a good time just the same. I'll put your names up at the club. I'd almost forgotten. There's no use in saying you don't care to see anyone. If you don't now, you will later. And if you don't—your husband will. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you are going to hold him in your arms all the time."

"Oh, I don't think that."

"The club is our meeting place. We offer all the usual attractions and pleasures of modern times, and you can pick and choose—or leave them all alone, as you wish. It is liberty hall, as far as that goes."

Nora left with regret, for she had taken a genuine liking to Mrs. Ashton. Miss Hargreaves she did not meet until later, but she found her eventually as amusing and more so than had been predicted.

On the verandah, when she got home, she found Druce waiting for her.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"At the club with Jim Ashton. He gave me some letters to people in San Francisco—architects. I'll have to get to work soon. I've been playing truant from school too long."

"Why didn't you tell me that Mr. Ashton was a friend of yours?" she asked suddenly.

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

Nora did not speak for a second. How annoying men could be! Then, she thought, how foolish she was!

"When are you going to San Francisco?"

"I don't know—I'm only thinking of it."

Druce contentedly blew rings of smoke from his pipe. The impalpable circles floated off, and he watched them lazily.

Nora saw that he was happy, and that he did not have a single care in the world.

"Work can wait," he said with a yawn; "I'm in no hurry!"

And the wife, with a quick change of mood, smiled, but her smile was more mysterious than ever.

# VI

## DRUCE THINKS ABOUT WORK

A WEEK later McAllister left for San Francisco. His idea was to look the ground over, and present the letters Ashton had given him. They were addressed to one of the leading firms of architects, George & Prince.

Nora, during his absence, took the opportunity of trying to teach her daughter. She found the child not only deficient, but in some cases absolutely ignorant. After a day or two, she provided herself with graded text-books, and the lessons proceeded with more or less routine. The child, too, came to her room in the morning while she was having her breakfast, and was allowed to play as she wished. In the evening, after the little girl's supper, another visit was made, which the mother vainly called a cosy time. Then, she read to the child, or instructed her in simple kindergarten games, so that she might be kept quiet until her bedtime.

Up to the present time, Wanda had been allowed

to run wild, and grow up like a plant. One advantage of this system had been to make the little girl as strong as an ox. She had not a nerve in her body, and she slept like a top the moment her head touched the pillow. She was afraid of nothing, and ate what was put before her. Her food, however, was of the simplest, for to do Janet justice, she had the old-fashioned idea of bringing up a child. Of course, having no educaton, she had never considered that branch, and so it was that Nora found there was a great deal, things that were purely elementary, of which Wanda was not aware. She had a fine mind, though, and her mother was wise enough not to force her by filling it too full of details; she gave her small doses at a time, and let the knowledge she sought to impart sink in, before she went on to the next bit.

If the child became dreamy and absorbed, she instituted a game to illustrate her point, and if that would not overcome the abstraction, the lessons were stopped for the day. It was unwise to try to burden a virgin mind by too much knowledge at once.

It will be seen that Nora was showing considerable ability in her system of teaching. She wished to discover her tastes, her weaknesses, her strength, and to find out how she could draw her out. She

was educating her daughter, but she was also teaching her how to love her mother.

The difference between right and wrong, the difference between justice and injustice she could not teach her, because she herself did not have a very clearly defined idea of these.

Nora was not fundamentally bad. Nobody is. As a graduate from a convent, she was strictly drilled in what was absolutely right, but when she came into the world of real men and women, it was of no use to her, because she had not been taught what was wrong. Therefore, she did not balance, because she had no judgment to use. She knew well the light, but she was totally ignorant of the prism-colored life of the world, and if one does not know the law of cause and effect, one cannot part the curtains for judgment, when the critical moment arrives.

Poor Nora only knew that certain things must be avoided, and that others made no appreciable change in the general scheme of things.

In this way she had put together a code of her own, though she was totally unconscious of its existence. With the education of her child, the best part of the woman came to the surface, but she was not aware of this. She worked over Wanda, much as she labored over some complicated situa-

tion in a book. And she worked with the same enthusiasm and zest that she put into her literary work, and so the time passed.

Druce sent a telegram every day. Sometimes, he announced that he was returning the next day, but when the time came, he sent another message to say that he was detained. Nora was not worried. She supposed he was detained by business, which took longer than he expected. Work could not be picked up. Luck did not lurk in every corner. Out of a small beginning, great things might come. She must wait. She must not be impatient. It would be selfish of her to send for him. She must wait without a murmur until he returned.

Over a week had passed since her husband had gone away. To be sure she got a message from him every day, but she missed him dreadfully. His prolonged absence worried her at last. She tried to argue with herself, that all was right, but the loneliness which she dismissed by sheer strength of will, returned with full force when she could fight no more.

When she had sunk to the lowest depths, when she imagined herself ill with longing, back came Druce, just as unexpectedly as he had gone.

"Druce! You don't know how I have missed you!" she cried. "You must never leave me again.

Oh! I have been so homesick for you. I did not realize how much until I have you back again. Did you miss me as much?"

"I missed you of course, but I was frightfully busy. I did not have much time to think. I had an exceedingly interesting time."

She looked up at him with a swift glance. She instinctively felt his thoughts were not entirely of her during his absence. She was a jealous woman and she wondered why.

"What is it, dear? Why do you not go on?"

"It's only that if I could get a position in San Francisco, would you wish to come too?"

"Don't you wish me to?" she asked in some surprise.

"It's not that, but, we have our home here, and it seems a pity to break it up just when you are no more than fairly settled!"

Again, there was something she could not fathom in his tone. What was it? She could not tell. She must find out. It was unbearable, this feeling of uncertainty, this strange restlessness. Was he trying to conceal something from her? Could that be it, or was there something he feared to say? It must be one or the other.

"You are not open with me—" she cried, at last, and her husband looking keenly at her, started, for

she had read his thoughts. It was the first time he had not given her his absolute confidence.

"You are not telling me all—there is something you are keeping back! It is not fair to do this. I am your wife, and you should keep nothing from me. If it is something I can do to help—"

"You can, if you only would!" he blurted out.

"Tell me how I can help you, dear!"

"Well, why shouldn't I tell you? If I hesitate any longer, you will think it is something of which I am ashamed. It is nothing of the sort. There is an obstacle to my taking a position with George & Prince. I can't deny it. They will take me in, if—if—"

"If what, dear? Don't be afraid to tell me!"

"I haven't enough money to do it—that's the reason!"

"Poor dear! Is that all? Come, how much must you put up to become a member of their firm, for that is what I suppose they are offering you?"

"Ten thousand dollars, and where on earth I am going to raise that amount, God only knows!"

It was a large amount. They were not rich. They could live comfortably, but a drain like this would come hard. However, it must be done, and she must give it to him. There was no other way. She had a nest egg. She had intended to use it for another purpose, the nucleus of a fortune,

which should be for them both. She had intended it as a surprise for Druce. She must abandon the idea. He should do what she had hoped to do, that was all, but she was disappointed. Yet it could not be helped.

"I shall give you the money." And she wondered why her voice sounded strange in her own ears.

"Why do you speak in that formal way? I am not asking you for money, am I?"

"No, of course not!" She was ashamed of a sudden suspicion she had had. She fancied that he was deceiving her. How absurdly jealous she was! She looked at him, as if begging for forgiveness. Suddenly it occurred to her that he was not aware of her fault. For one hideous moment, she imagined he had been unfaithful to her!

"What is the matter?" he asked, noticing the change in her manner, and wondering whether he had offended her.

"Nothing," she answered, completely sobered. "I'll get the money for you now. You'll have time to send it off by this afternoon's mail?"

"But—wait, if I accept this position, it will mean separation for a time, until I can find a home for you."

"Only for a time. I can wait."

And she hurried from him into the house.

# VII

## NORA REVIEWS THE SITUATION

DRUCE had been unfaithful to her! The hateful words throbbed over and over again in her brain. She loathed herself for her unjust suspicion, for in her heart she knew this mute accusation was not true. If she could only rid her mind of it! She had not the slightest reason for supposing that her husband had been unduly intimate with another woman while away from her. The idea, however, refused to be dislodged, for it had seized her against her better judgment, her will. What had started this odious thought? She could not tell. It might have been intuition! No, not that, for a woman's intuition was rarely at fault.

Several times during the night she awoke, her mind again active. She dozed and forgot, only to wake with a start, and remember all the more vividly. It was terrible. The moon rose late, and in the faint silver light that drifted in, she saw the face of her husband fitfully illuminated.

She studied it feverishly. Her eye caught and

held every passing change. Surely it must be the light, which gave his mouth that oddly changed look! Mobile it was, but not weak, as it appeared now.

Nora remained motionless. He had moved slightly, and was murmuring something. She tried to catch its meaning, but she could not. She sighed gently, for he had smiled. Surely he would not smile, if everything was not right. He could not. As the smile still lingered, she recognized in him the likeness of the man as he had been when she first met him. His mocking expression slightly changed. It must be that his love for her lived behind that characteristic expression. It had been so in the old days. He had admitted it then. It must be true still. It could not have taken such a short time for him to change!

He would be incapable of actually deceiving her. She remembered the vows he had made to love her always, to be true, to keep himself for her, forever!

She closed her eyes wearily. She could fight no more. The decree of fate must take its course. When next she opened her eyes, the grey light of early dawn was filtering in. Softly she rose, and peeped out. The first rosy rays of the sun were beginning to shine aslant through the trees. As she looked, the sun came up in all its glory, and

the new day was born. On the lawn the shadow of lace fell shimmering through the sun-kissed branches.

With a sigh she turned back into the room. The brightness of day had come.

Did it mean that doubt had fled with the darkness? That hope was reborn with the day? Softly on tiptoe, she stole back to the side of the bed. The weak look had gone. Ah! It was the face of the man she loved. All at once, she knew that everything was unchanged between them! She believed in him absolutely, and she put her foolish thoughts away from her forever.

In the days that followed, she tried to do this, but at the same time her eyes were open for the slightest change in him, as far as it affected her. At times, she thought him a shade less affectionate than usual. So she wavered between hope and fear.

She did not dare to ask him when he again intended making another visit to San Francisco, for she feared to show him any feeling which would tend to disquiet, or to unsettle any plans he may have contemplated.

Another inevitable change took place gradually. Druce sought the society of his own sex more and more. He went to the club a good deal, but he drank moderately. He was unlike most men of his

set in this respect. Nevertheless, Nora suspected that he drank much more than was good for him, although she never openly accused him of this.

If he were irritable, still she must endure. Then, just as unexpectedly she knew that she must not give way to imagination. That would be unjust. She must explain things by natural reasons. It was the only way if she expected to be happy, and to remain so.

If she had stopped to consider, she would have realized that all women go through these self-examinations, these doubts, and laugh at them, when they come to see their utter futility.

She thought at times she detected other changes in Druce, but they were so subtle, so intangible, that she could not be certain. He was as affectionate as ever, but, in some incomprehensible way, he seemed to be absorbed. He was turning over something in his mind. What was it? It was impossible for her to answer this vexing question. Indeed, there did not seem to be any answer at hand.

Then she took a new view-point. What if Druce had not changed? What if it were she herself who had changed? It might be interesting to watch herself, and so put this idea to the test.

Druce went to the club a good deal. Sometimes he lunched there. Often he did not tell her his

plans. Could he be neglecting her? No, not exactly that, but they were less together than at the beginning of their married life. This was not unnatural. She could not expect to have her husband always at her side. He had other interests, other pursuits. She was making a mountain out of a mole-hill.

She noticed his comings and goings as part of the routine. She had fought her battle with self, and had gained, as she supposed, the victory. Her husband had noticed nothing out of the ordinary. He went about his business as any man would, but he was more absorbed than at first. He must have something on his mind. He was growing more and more interested in architecture. He had had his vacation, and he returned to his work with renewed vigor. He was being drawn back, as a magnet draws steel, and even if he could have resisted, he would not, for he loved his profession.

Nora noticed that he was drawing on odd sheets of paper, but that when she came, he destroyed the sheets and put the crumpled sheets in his pockets. He denied that he was doing anything worth mentioning. There was nothing to show.

Nora was not surprised. She accepted this without question. It was like this in her literary work. She hated to read to anyone what she was

writing, until she had actually finished it. The time would come when he would tell her all. He had always given her confidence for confidence. Perhaps he was withholding a pleasant surprise!

As far as she and Wanda were concerned, the child accepted her mother, because Janet told her she must do so, and she always obeyed Janet without question. It was part of the excellent system of the old nurse. She did what her mother asked her, but she did it as a duty, though she did not complain. She knew that after the hour or two were over, she could go back to Janet or to her toys. Her mother had unpacked the toys, but both women had neglected to tell the child, and so the mother's plan of making that a means of winning her fell rather flat. For the moment, the mother was occupied in the study of her husband, so the child, outside of lessons and the time she spent with her mother as a regular thing, ran wild again, and enjoyed herself to the full.

One afternoon, Nora came in from a walk with Wanda, and found Druce sketching an angle of the house. He was absorbed, and did not seem aware of her presence. Suddenly he looked up. He showed his annoyance clearly, without attempting to conceal it.

"What are you doing?" asked his wife.

"Picking daisies!" he answered, after a pause, and then resumed his work, with lips compressed. He determined not to be interrupted. He was in his happiest mood for composition. It was like a thread. If it broke, it might be lost forever.

Nora stepped back for a moment. Druce still worked on. Her hand unconsciously dropped Wanda's. The child walked away, and spying Janet, ran to her. Her mother did not notice her absence.

Druce gave a sigh of satisfaction. He had finished what he was doing. Nora waited, but he said nothing. Then she turned away.

"Where are you going?" asked he.

"Only to my room," was the quiet answer. "I must take off my hat—it is so heavy."

He whistled softly, and looked back at his drawing. He was unconscious of any omission, but she was aware that it was the first time he had not kissed her when she returned home. It was a small incident, but she remembered, though he had forgotten. As she removed her hat, she realized that she had been tactless to interrupt him. She made haste to return and explain the matter to him, but when she came out on the verandah, he was gone. Later on she did not refer to the matter. It was not the moment, and besides, it made it too im-

portant. It was not so serious as that. She did, however, look reproachfully at him, but he, misunderstanding her meaning, took her in his arms. How blind men were! With all his faults, he was her ideal, and she loved him. That made up for all that had gone before, for love had blinded her for the moment. She was happy. She lived again. That evening she kissed Wanda good-night very tenderly.

"What is the matter, mother?" asked the child wonderingly. "You are hurting me. Please, let me go!"

"I am so happy, dear—" she murmured.

"Why—is daddy coming?"

The child sat bolt upright, but the mother said nothing.

"Tell me when he is coming! Of course, I like Mr. Druce, but—he's not my daddy—"

"No!" responded Nora curtly, "he's not." And, turning away, she left the room.

"How contradictory her mother was! Who could Mr. Druce be?" wondered the little girl.

## VIII

### A TINY RIPPLE

NORA realized when it was too late that she had made a fatal error in betraying her feelings to her child. It is impossible to deceive so young a mind, and that is just what she attempted to do. What must Wanda have thought of her? She had paused on the stairs, and debated with herself whether to return to the room, and attempt an explanation. She had finally decided not to do so, and was glad now that she had not, for it might have made matters worse. To-morrow she would act as if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. It was likely that the little girl had attached no undue importance to her mother's strange manner; perhaps she had not even noticed it. Really, she was becoming extraordinarily sensitive and imaginative!

That evening Druce did not come home to dinner. He did, however, telephone from the club that he was dining there, and hoped Nora would

not mind. She replied indifferently, though her heart was beating fast as she spoke, and after a few explanatory speeches on the part of Druce, she abruptly hung up the receiver.

After dinner, she decided to stroll over to the country club, which was not far. She had no plans when she started, and half-way there she stopped and thought over a number of excuses she might make to explain her presence there alone, for she had never gone to the club in the evening, unless accompanied by her husband, or else when she had been invited to dine with some ladies and play bridge afterwards. What could she say, if anybody asked her what she was doing in such a semi-public place alone in the evening? What possible excuse could she make?

Nora was in a slightly exalted state of mind, and this made her think it necessary to offer the most careful explanations. She did not wish to be put in a wrong light, nor did she wish anyone to think she could be placed in such a position. She was a little perturbed when the saw the lights of the club-house looming up before her. Why had she come? And what did she expect to gain by coming? Was it honorable for her to spy upon her husband? Ought she not rather to take his absence as a matter of course? He had not been in

the habit of staying away as a regular thing. Was she not acting as if she were actually deserted? It was really somewhat ridiculous, looking at it as she did in a calmer moment.

Once, however, having come this far, she pushed on, believing that her courage was egging her on to do what she told herself was her duty. Duty! She was rather dramatic—unnecessarily so, and for what reason?

She stepped on to the porch, and peered in at one of the windows. In the dining-room was a party of three ladies, Mrs. Ashton, Miss Hargreaves and Mrs. Dorian. Other people were dining there too, but she could not see her husband anywhere. Perhaps he was dining in the smaller room.

What should she do? Go in and join the three ladies, or wait until they came out to have their coffee? She decided to wait, but she could imagine their surprise when she should rise to greet them. What should she say?

It was a bright moonlight night, and instinctively she chose a chair in shadow, so that she should not be too much in evidence. She did not wish to be at a disadvantage. She preferred to see the others before they caught sight of her.

After a time, the three ladies rose, and came out.

Nora rose, and as she saw them coming, came forward.

"Confess that you are surprised to see me!" she said, with an assumption of gayety.

"I'm never surprised at anything," began Ethel Ashton.

"I suppose you were tired of being alone—" came next from Miss Jessica Hargreaves.

"Your husband is dining here. I saw him with that horrid Major Gray Hampton," said Mrs. Dorian. "I wonder you let him associate with such queer characters. Surely you haven't been married long enough to lose hold of him as easy as that."

"I am not responsible for his friends," replied Nora trying not to speak stiffly. "A man often has lots of men friends, men he meets in business, and that sort of thing, whom his wife never knows. Why should she? It would bore them quite as much as it would her."

"More so, I'm sure," suggested Miss Jessica tartly.

"Oh, come!" broke in Ethel, scenting battle in the other's tone; "don't begin yet. Let's have a few minutes' peace and quiet before we go in to play cards."

"Why shouldn't Mrs. McAllister make a fourth?"

exclaimed Emilie Dorian. "You play auction bridge, don't you?"

"Yes! To tell you the truth, I came over to see whether I could find a game. My husband *is* dining here, and I *was* lonely."

"I thought you would turn up," said Ethel, "that is, when I saw your husband had made up his mind to dine here. It was the major who persuaded him, though I have no doubt he told you he was dining with my husband. Major Hampton is an old friend of my husband's—a friend of former days. They don't see much of each other now. The major has gone down hill, but Jim is too honest to throw over his friends just because—"

"They are a bit shady, I suppose you were going to say," said Miss Hargreaves maliciously.

"Jim is a good friend," said Mrs. Ashton, looking at Miss Hargreaves, though she was speaking generally. "I think you all know that by this time. He is the most unselfish and the dearest fellow in the world."

"But he can put away more liquor than any man I know—" laughed Miss Hargreaves admiringly. "I do like a man who is a good sport!"

"Evidently!" remarked Mrs. Ashton dryly; "and Jim's the right sort," she said, for she was over loyal and devoted to her husband.

"I didn't mean to say anything against him—anything I would regret—" began Jessica.

"Like the lady who did not wish to say anything against a certain other lady, and so said that she considered her a hog," said Ethel with a laugh.

"Very much the same kind of thing!" admitted Miss Hargreaves, evidently seeing that she had been worsted. "And now," she continued, "why shouldn't we go in and start our game? I hate dawdling too long after dinner."

"I agree with you," laughed Ethel, good-humoredly; "if we expect any one to have a shred of reputation left."

"Why don't you speak for yourself, John?" said Jessica slyly.

"I don't have to!" was the sharp reply.

"Ladies, ladies!" put in Emilie sharply, "do let's go in. The cards will keep our minds busy—"

"Which may be more prudent in the end," suggested Nora, laughing.

The others laughed too, and shortly afterwards they rose and made their way into the card-room.

In an incredibly short time, the game was in full swing, and Nora who played well, proved a welcome addition. In the years to come these four often played together. As is often the case, in the

long run the winnings and losses offset each other, but the stakes ran high.

When Nora was not actually playing, she thought about her husband. She wondered what he was doing. He had said he was playing cards after dinner, but the major had been described as a hard drinker. Druce was a good sport, like Jim Ashton, and she had her doubts as to what might happen.

The habitual drunkard was a creature Nora loathed, because she did not understand a craving for liquor. She drank wine with her meals, and sometimes indulged in a cocktail before dinner, but beyond this slight indulgence, she took nothing. That a man should drink and be brutal to her, she had never considered, but now as she thought of the possibility the evening might have in store for her, she shuddered. This was a contingency she had never thought she would have to face. She was convinced that Druce was drinking heavily. She knew for a certainty that the dinner and card game were but an excuse for a debauch. And now this bad habit was going to wreck her life! It was a pity, but the situation would have to be faced. If it proved serious, still it would have to be endured, though her love for Druce would receive a serious shock.

Nora was beginning to make herself miserable,

and it was the game alone that saved her from going to pieces. The concentration which was necessary kept her from losing her head, and her pride prevented her from showing the other women the anxiety she was enduring.

She won heavily, though she told herself with a smile, which she strove not to make a bitter one, that this was due to luck as much as play, for auction was more of a gambling game than the ordinary game of bridge whist.

"Lucky at cards!" murmured Miss Jessica, bitterly, for she hated to lose.

"What do you mean?" asked Nora, trying to control her rising agitation.

"Oh, I'm sure Miss Jessica means nothing personal," broke in Emilie hastily. "It's only that she's horribly superstitious—that's really all."

Nora smiled nervously, and counted up her winnings. Then she gave herself up to speculation as to what the old lady really meant by her speech.

She remembered that Miss Hargreaves was brutally outspoken, but she could not have intended to be personal in this instance; it would have been too glaring an evidence of bad taste, and Miss Jessica was a lady. She might be sharp, but she could not be ill-bred. Doubtless her words had meant nothing more than their meaning actually conveyed.

It would not be strange for Nora to overhear things said about her, for was not her history public property? She must expect some hard knocks. There were many narrow-minded people in the world, who would criticize her for what she had done, but these people were of the world; surely they must understand that she had done nothing wrong.

The incident, however, had opened her eyes to possibilities. She believed she recognized the truth, at last. She had only Druce's love to depend upon, and she must not lose that!

She looked up, and saw that her husband was standing in the door-way.

"They told me you were here," he said, and Nora noticed that he was as sober as a judge. "I lost heavily."

After she had bidden them all good-night, Nora took his arm, and they went out on the verandah.

"And—I won—large sums!" volunteered she, her voice trembling, for she felt the reaction of the long evening.

"What is the matter—you are unnerved!"

"Only that I'm tired—to death, but—I love you more than ever,—only—you must not leave me—I'm frightened—I think!"

"Come! we'll go home, little woman," said

he tenderly, for he thought she was only tired.

"She wears herself out with her moods!" he thought to himself; "and women are the deuce when they're doing that sort of thing. I wish she'd stop it—that's all!"

# IX

## WANDA WRITES A LETTER

One morning, Wanda and Janet were sitting in the garden, the child playing with her doll, the old nurse, knitting.

The little one soon tired of her game, and letting the doll slip, she allowed her eyes to roam aimlessly about in search of some new interest. Apparently finding nothing out of the ordinary, she rose and strolled about. Filled to the brim with imagination, she stopped at bushes, pretending they were shops, and made purchases, or ordered a horse, upon which she careered about in a delightfully realistic manner. During her game, she kept up a running conversation, which always had a distinct bearing on what she happened to be doing at the moment. Her mind was active, though, and she flitted from one thing to the other, but always enjoying herself, and believing as most children can, in the reality of it all.

After a time, the novelty wore off, and she returned and sat by her nurse, watching her knit with grave, interested look, but her mind was not in the present.

"When is daddy coming?" she asked abruptly.

"I don't know, dearie!" said Janet, without looking up.

The old woman began to croon a lullaby, but watched Wanda, who was now looking away, her brows frowning in perplexity. Presently the child wheeled about suddenly, and looked sharply at her nurse.

"I don't believe he's coming here at all. Then, where are we to meet him?" she inquired.

Janet, with a sigh, felt that she could not any longer resist the appeal she read in the wistful, young eyes fixed upon hers. She had parried direct thrusts like this before, but now she knew that she must tell the truth.

"I don't believe he's coming here—" she ventured, pushing the stitches thoughtfully along the needle, but not looking in the little girl's direction.

"Then where is he going to meet us?" repeated the child calmly. "You might tell me that, for I'm growing up, at least my mother says so, and she ought to now, for she was a little girl just like me once, you know—"

"Listen, Miss Wanda! Your daddy isn't coming here, and that's the truth; I don't think we are a-going to see him—for some time."

"I see!" said the child, for she had complete confidence in her nurse; "then, I expect I'd better write to him."

"That would be nice, I am sure," exclaimed Janet, "and I'll tell you what to say."

"I know what to say, but you'll have to help me write it. I'm only just learning, you know."

"Perhaps, I'd best write it for you, until you learn. How would that do?"

"Yes, that would be a good way!" answered the child, after a moment's thought. "Now, take a pencil and begin."

The old woman did as she was bid, and began to write.

"What are you writing?" asked Wanda suspiciously. "I haven't told you anything yet."

"I was only putting down the address on the envelope."

"Well—put 'Dear Daddy.' Have you got that? Very well. Now, listen, for I've got lots to say."

The child rested her chin on her palms, and pressed her lips together for a minute, then she began to speak, slowly at first, and then more quickly.

"Not so fast, little girl! My old fingers won't go as quickly as that."

"I forgot that you were writing. I thought I was just talking to my dear daddy. He's always with me—in my heart, you know," added the child earnestly.

"And I hope he always will be! But go on! You said you had so much to say."

"And I have. 'I love you, and I'm always thinking of you. I wish you were here. If you come, be sure to let me know. Now, don't forget, because that's very important.' It is important, isn't it, Janet?"

"Oh, yes, you couldn't leave that out. What next?"

"Mother has a friend here—he's—"

"I wouldn't say that—"

"Why not? He is a friend, and I thought you were just going to write down what I wanted!" exclaimed the little girl.

"I only thought—" quibbled the nurse, but the child interrupted her gravely.

"Don't think, then—it's a bad habit. Mother says so! Now go on! 'He's not you, and I love you, but he's nice, and I like him, though he doesn't play as well as you do. What lovely games you and Eliot and I used to have, didn't we?' "

"That'll make him happy to remember the old days!" murmured the old woman, sighing gently.

"Yes, it ought to, because we were so happy then."

"Aren't you happy now, Miss Wanda?" asked Janet anxiously.

"Oh, yes, I suppose I am, but I was so very happy in the old days. It isn't the same now, but I suppose it's because I'm older. I don't think those old games would seem the same now as they did. I'm different, and everything's changed."

"In what way, dear? You've got a lovely home, your toys—good things to eat—"

"I had all that before, but I don't feel as if this place was home, not like the other—that is. I miss home, and I wish we could go back there. Tell daddy that! Yes, you must. Everything I say must be put down just as I say it—otherwise you're not doing what you said you'd do."

"I got it down. Is that all?"

"No, tell him there are things I can't understand, but I'm thinking them out. When I've decided what they do mean, I'll write him about them."

"What are some of the things that puzzle you? Perhaps I could help you."

"I think you could. Well—one of the things that bother me is, what Mr. Druce is doing here?"

"He's taking care of your mother. You had better call him 'father.' "

"Father and daddy are the same thing. I couldn't call him daddy—because my own daddy wouldn't like it, I'm sure. Is mother ill?"

"No, why do you say that?"

"Because you said that man was taking care of her. People don't need taking care of, unless they're sick."

"No, he's taking your daddy's place—"

"Why should he? How could he? She couldn't be married to him, if that's what you mean—not until my daddy dies. Don't talk nonsense, Janet! Sometimes, I think you are very silly—you say such silly things."

"Don't say that, Miss Wanda, dear. It isn't nice—" admonished the old woman reprovingly.

"Still it's true!" mused the child.

"Everything that's true isn't always nice—"

"No!" answered the child, "but let's go on! Listen!"

The letter was finished at last, and Wanda begged Janet to read it to her, and not to leave things out.

"It's a way you have—leaving out things!" and the child listened attentively while the nurse read what had been dictated. At times, she nodded her head approvingly, at others, she touched the old

woman on the arm, and bit her lip as she strove to decide whether it sounded all right or not.

"Things sound different when they're written down—I've noticed that when mother gives me dictation exercises. Yes, I think that's all right. It sounds right, and it is right."

"Then I'll address it, and send it off. Shall I?" asked Janet, smiling.

"Yes. I wonder when he'll write to me. He'll have to answer it, won't he? People always answer letters, don't they? I heard mother and—Mr. Druce—he isn't my father, so you needn't frown like that—discussing that the other day. Perhaps, if he sees it's your writing, he won't want to read it. He'll just say, 'oh, it's only a letter from Janet!' and tear it up. I hope he won't do that. I think he'll soon see it's really from me, and you did say I was learning to write, and that I was going to write just as soon as I learnt more about it."

"I wrote just what you told me to—"

"I thought you would, for I think you're just a little bit afraid of me, now aren't you, you dear old Janet?" asked the child putting her arms around the nurse's neck and hugging her.

"Yes! Indeed, I am, particularly when you try to choke me like that."

"You don't suppose I'm really trying to choke

you, do you? Why, if I really wanted to—I could do it as easy as—easy."

"Don't really try then," and Janet gently released the little hands. "Come dear, we must go in, it's time to get ready for lunch."

"Bother lunch—I was having such a good time. It's always the way, now. Just when I'm having a good time, some one says that it's time to do something else. I'm tired of having to do other things."

"You're getting older, you see."

"I don't know why it's so much easier to talk to you than it is to my mother. She never seems to understand, but you always do. I wonder why it is."

"You've been with me a good deal, and your mother had her writing to do. It's a pity—"

"What's a pity, Janet? Why don't you go on?"

"It's a pity—" repeated she confusedly, "that she—couldn't have put you—in one of her books. It would have brought you closer together like," she concluded lamely.

"Would it have made me know her any better?" inquired Wanda wonderingly.

"Yes, dear, it would, but, child, I'm only your nurse, and she's your mother. You must love her,

and when I'm gone, you can help your mother to be—to be—"

"To be what? How strange you are to-day!"

"To be happy, but—I don't mean that—exactly, but to make her happiness complete."

"That would be very hard to do, because, you see, you're more like my real mother, and she's—just—pretend."

"You must never tell her that. You must try to love her, as much as you do me. She wants you to love her—"

"Well, I'll do it if I can, but it's going to be terribly hard, that's what I think."

Janet looked at the child standing there twisting her hands together, and sighed. What an unfortunate thing it was that such an attractive little girl should be separated from the poor mother who craved her love! What was in the child's mind? She was thinking deeply, but Janet of old had learned that though Wanda was honest as the sea, as the saying goes, and would never tell an untruth, she kept shut up in her head a lot of things, and could never be induced to speak of them.

Wanda gathered up her toys, and followed her nurse slowly into the house.

But the active mind was at work with its problem, its questionings, in which her father, her

mother and Mr. Druce were all mixed up in a hopeless jumble.

If her mother was ill, why didn't she see a doctor? Was Mr. Druce a doctor? If so, that would explain a great many things, but not why he was here all the time. Doctors came and went, when people were sick, and her mother did not seem really sick. Perhaps she was worrying about something! It was all very confusing.

Why didn't her daddy come out here too, it would make things so pleasant, and more like the dear old days. She was always hoping he might come. She was expecting to find him waiting for her when she came in! She was not exactly disappointed when she found he was not there, for she was philosophical, and perhaps it would be to-morrow! She felt that some day he would come, and she was happy in the thought, and content to wait in patience for this great event, which she accepted as certain in her own mind. Perhaps he will come to-day! It would be so nice if he did!

And the child happy in her dreaming, smiled contentedly, and ran upstairs, calling out merrily to Janet to catch her if she could.

# X

## SHE'S ONLY A CHILD

"MOTHER let's have a little talk. I don't want to read this book any longer!"

Nora was polishing her nails, while the little girl had picked up a novel with which to amuse herself. The child had been spelling the words out, but as there were no pictures, and the subject-matter was beyond her comprehension, her interest had palled before very long.

"What do you wish to talk about, dear?"

"Oh, lots of things," answered the child. "Things I usually talk to Janet about. She says she is only my nurse—I'd almost forgotten she wasn't my mother—I've been with her so much, you see, but now, I've decided to make you my real mother, which you are, and not pretend, as I've sometimes imagined. I'm going to try to love you just the same as I do Janet, more if I can, but you mustn't expect too much just at first, because, it's as if I had to learn to love you, you see. Not like a

lesson, but—something of the same sort, as the saying is!"

"Don't use that expression, my child—it's like a servant!"

"What's the matter with servants? If Janet is a servant, I'd like to be one, for she's always kind to me, and shows how much she loves me."

"That may be true!" admitted the mother unwisely; "but you've had no discipline—you've grown up like a little savage—and now you're older, you must be taught how to behave yourself."

"I've been very happy—"

"Yes, of course, Janet has been very good to you, but—she's an ignorant person, kind—still not the best influence to develop—"

For the moment, Nora did not realize that she was talking to a child.

"Mother intends to take care of you now. She will teach you many things—"

"Teach! That means lessons! I hate lessons—the name 'lessons' is enough to make you tired."

"Don't make faces, dear. It isn't nice!"

"I'm sorry. I forgot. I won't do it again!"

"That's right. I thought you would be reasonable. What shall we talk about?"

"I wanted to ask you some questions—"

"Yes—what are they? Go on! Don't be afraid!"

"Oh, I'm not afraid," responded the child, as if surprised. "I'm never afraid of people who love me, and you said—"

"Yes, dear, I do love you. I wish I could tell you—"

"But you don't know how to say it? Is that it? Do you know that's just the way with me, mother. It's very curious. Let's try to understand what each of us is like—you and me—it'll be like a game, and we can see who'll win first."

"If one wins, the other loses—"

"Of course, but you know what I mean. Mother, don't be so exact."

"That's not a fault, and, my dear—I don't always wish to be correcting you—"

"My goodie gracious! I hope not—that would be very tiresome—"

Nora thought it best not to reprove, so she caught her up in her arms, instead, kissing her hungrily.

"Nothing must be tiresome between us, my child."

"No, not if we are going to make a success of this love business."

"I see what you mean!" And the mother looked wistfully at the child, the tears were very close behind the smile she gave her.

The child looked curiously at her.

"Don't make such a business of it—that'll take all the fun out of the game."

"So you look on it as a game, do you?"

"Yes, it makes it so much more exciting!"

"Hardly a game!" murmured Nora, half to herself, and then: "What did you want to tell me—I mean to ask me, dear?"

"I've wanted to ask for a long time—when are we going to meet daddy?"

Nora stared at the child in complete consternation. How was she to answer such a question? Could she tell her the truth? No, it would break her heart, for, with the exception of a visit now and again, she would never see her father again, and never in the same old way. When they did meet, as meet they must, according to the terms of the divorce, the child would ask the same questions which had puzzled the mother, and how could they be answered save by telling the whole, miserable truth? As years passed, the child would understand. She would hear it from others. That would be the easiest way. It would be too terrible to have to say such things in cold blood. She had not the courage to tell her child the truth. What was the truth? Even that she could not bring herself to face. Why not? Because it was wrong? No, because it was over and done with. For no other

reason. This she reiterated to herself with unnecessary vehemence, and looked straight before her.

"I don't know, dear—nothing has been arranged."

She had feared Wanda would read the truth, which lay hidden by the shadow of the falsehood, for she was deliberately deceiving the child, a little trusting creature, and why? Because she was also the child of a man she had thrust out of her own life forever. Why did the little one's eyes fixed upon hers seem to be looking into her heart, and reading there what she felt she must conceal. The time had not come when the child should know all. She, her mother, was keeping back from her what it would pain the child to know now. She wished to spare her anything that might make her unhappy.

To explain the matter of the divorce required diplomacy. Then too, the shock of such knowledge would be terrible to one who was too young to understand. It might be dangerous. It might injure the child's development.

Thus did Nora try to justify herself. Under the guise of sparing her child, she was in reality sparing herself. She was trying to create for herself a paradise. There were ugly things existent, but she shut her eyes to them.

"Why is Mr. Druce here all the time?" queried Wanda, looking hard at her mother.

This time, Nora did not look away. It would be cowardly. She knew she must hold the child by the strength of her will. She must not lose ground, she must not let her stray away from her influence. If she did, she would never regain the lost vantage point. She held her breath, and looked at the child through half-closed lids. What was she to say?

"He is living here. It is his home and mine. Why do you ask such questions?"

"Janet said that he was taking care of you. Are you sick?"

"No, I am not. Janet—doesn't—understand."

"She always tells the truth—"

"Oh, yes, I know that, but in this case she has unwittingly misled you."

"I don't understand how she could do such a thing. It is not like her. Mother, how could she tell me what was not true? I cannot believe it!"

"She did not know she was misleading you, I say."

Nora's tone was a trifle harsh. She wished she were alone. The child was becoming unbearable. And there were ten minutes more before she would go to bed!

"Why is daddy not here? That's what I can't understand."

"You must not bother your head about these questions. You will make yourself ill. Forget them! Take another book, or shall I tell you a story?"

"Yes, do, mother. You tell such lovely stories. That's the best thing about you. I love you when you tell stories. You look beautiful then, and I love beautiful things. Go ahead, and tell the biggest whopper you know."

Nora could not help smiling, though she tried to frown her displeasure first. She studied the child for a moment. The eyes that looked into hers were wide open. There was no hidden thought there. They were straightforward and direct. The child meant what she said, but she did not know that she was hurting her mother. No, she could not intentionally have done such a thing, for she confessed that she loved her mother because she was beautiful. It was not the sort of love she longed to possess, but it was a beginning.

"But first, do tell me why daddy is not here."

"He's away—with your brother." And, Nora turned her head away to hide the spasm of pain that distorted her features.

Here was a wound that was always fresh with every breath she drew. That had been the real pain of parting from the old life. She had kissed

him for the last time when he slept. She had crept out of the house without seeing him again. The little son, whom she would never see again! She was allowed by law to do so, but she could not, because the second parting would be far harder to bear than the first. The pain would be unbearable!

"I don't know why I think so, but daddy ought to be here!"

Nora wanted to shake her, but she controlled herself, and instead, pushed her gently away.

Two little arms stole around her neck, and she shivered.

"Good-night, mother. It is late, and I'm afraid Janet will be furious."

Nora kissed Wanda as if she were unreal, and watched her as she left the room. She sighed, and drew her breath in sharply, and then she remained motionless, sitting there like a frozen person. After a long time, as it seemed to her, she bent forward and shuddered.

"She's only a child. She did not know, but these eternal questions must stop!"

That was certain. She must manage it somehow. She must be patient. She must study the child. It would not be so easy, but she must not despair. Suddenly she laughed aloud. She could not fail. She had never failed yet.

Druce, who was passing along the corridor, opened the door and came in.

"You are happy, dear one!"

"Yes—I am happy!" she answered almost hysterically. "Kiss me—take me in your arms—I love you!" she murmured. "On the lips—on the lips, I say!"

He, at least, was hers, and by the power of love, mad, unreasoning love alone.

# XI

## DRUCE BEGS THE QUESTION

On several occasions, Druce had asked Nora for various small sums of money, and she had given them to him without question. It had generally been before he started for San Francisco that he required the money, and she thought that he had merely run short for the time being, and borrowed from her rather than rush to the bank at the last moment. It was the most natural thing in the world for him to do, and the most convenient. She gave the money willingly, and without further thought, dismissed the matter from her mind.

For a long time, he had not asked her for any, and she wondered why, until she remembered with a laugh that he had not been away from home for over a month.

One day, several months later, after one of these intervals, she laughingly asked him if he did not need some "spondulix." To her surprise, he flushed slightly, and looked rather angry.

"What's the joke?" he asked brusquely.

"I'm surprised that you ask, for you looked at

me as if you understood, I thought you did understand. It was only a roundabout way of asking you when you will have to go away again—"

"I really don't understand what you are driving at!"

Nora fancied his tone sounded somewhat formal, and tried to discover the reason for it.

"Druce! you seem angry—"

"I am not angry. Why should I be? That's just like a woman—to fly at conclusions. Your joke, if it was intended as such, was rather—far fetched, and, I think—in—bad taste!"

"In bad taste! What do you mean?"

"Why, it looks as if I had borrowed the money from you, without the faintest notion of repaying it—"

"I never expected you to do so—it never entered my head that it was not a gift, and I have never even looked for—interest—"

"Though I have given you—love!"

"Yes, but you solemnly promised that—in the marriage ceremony. That formed part of the holy contract, didn't it?"

Druce did not answer at once. He seemed undecided what to say, and Nora was puzzled by his silence, for which there appeared to be no reason at this moment.

"I feel," said he finally, nonchalantly flicking a piece of dust off the cuff of his coat, "that it puts me in an unusual position—"

"That's a curious thing to say. Explain what you mean, please!"

Nora was rather startled, though she was careful not to show it.

"Well—if you had been suspicious, you might have thought—I was spending the money on—another woman—"

"In the first year of our marriage! Oh, no! I don't think you are that kind of a man."

Nora smiled scornfully, but Druce turned away, and looked off. The action mystified his wife, but she waited for what was to follow, for he suddenly faced her again.

"But—you are jealous, you know! Frightfully jealous!"

"Yes, I am, and now, that I come to think of it, you have put a new idea in my head! It was unwise of you. I wonder what made you do it!"

"Perhaps it was a guilty conscience!" he suggested, looking slyly at her.

"Oh, come, Druce! I wouldn't go on, if I were you. You might go too far, you know. I am jealous, but—I am not a fool. Why, you would not dare to deceive me in that banal way. I know

you would not. It would be like the infidelity of a —traveling salesman. I can't believe you are such an absolute vulgarian, but—granted that you were already tired of me, it would last longer than six months. You are making yourself ridiculous. Now, don't frown and look so serious! You are not a scoundrel! Druce! wait—don't speak yet! I was only joking—but it's all true—glaringly true. We have both been dealing too lightly with serious things—making dangerous jokes of them—things that should be sacred, and—we deserve to suffer. I only hope we won't, but—it's like tempting Providence, you know. I'm sorry, and it was as much my fault as it was yours."

"Nora, you talk like people in books. Cleverly and well, but not quite naturally. In real life they don't talk quite so—badly—at least, I have never heard them do so."

"People in my books talk as I have heard them in real life."

"That's dangerous!" suggested Druce, who had regained his composure in a measure. "You might be sued for libel."

"The truth would be no defence, I know!" she said, playing up to his new mood, and they both laughed.

"When are you going to take up your work

again?" he asked, evidently relieved to find a congenial topic, because he felt he had been near the danger mark.

"Soon, I think. You have given me many new ideas. I really believe I'm eager to jot them down."

"I'm glad of that. There's nothing like work to keep one from thinking too much—"

"Why shouldn't I think about things?" she inquired suddenly alert.

"I didn't say you shouldn't think—I mean that too much thinking is a dangerous habit—"

"You have no bad habits, I suppose?" she asked, with a touch of mischief, but he said nothing in reply. He smiled foolishly, and then he went out to play golf.

Nora rose and looked out of the window. Then, with a shrug of the shoulders, she rang for her maid, and dressed to go out. She was to take Wanda for a drive, and end up at the Golf club, where they were to meet Druce and the Ashtons about tea-time.

During the first part of the drive, Mrs. McAllister was more or less absorbed. She was in no mood for talking, and in response to her little daughter's ceaseless chatter, a slight pressure of the hand, from time to time, was all she could give her, for the recent bits of conversation between

Druce and herself stood out too clearly, for her to rid her mind of them all at once.

Nora was working herself into a frenzy of jealousy and unjust suspicion, when Wanda's insistent voice broke in on her mood, and brought her back with a shock to the present.

"Mother, what are you thinking about? You've been so quiet. Don't you think we ought to talk a little bit? It would make the drive pleasanter. I don't care much for driving, but if we talk some of the time, I think I can bear it."

Nora glanced at the wistful face looking up at her, and sighed. Why could she not live from day to day, as this little one did? Why did she have to go over the past, and attempt to peer into the future? She smiled at Wanda, and the child recognizing that a moment of sympathy was hers, smiled back again, and nestled closer to her mother.

Nora, under the spell of this unusual affectionate demonstration of the child, softened. She drew nearer to her. As she looked tenderly at her, she realized that she might learn more of the little creature, by putting herself on a level with her, and thus try to see life from her point of view.

The rest of the drive was a decided success. Nora unbent more and more, until she, herself became a child. Wanda was delighted with her

mother's affectionate mood, and more than met it, and when the carriage drew up at the steps of the club house, Nora felt both refreshed and exhilarated. At first, he looked surprised, then, he too, smiled, and led the way to the verandah where they joined the Ashtons.

Mrs. McAllister was exceedingly gay. She seemed completely to have thrown away the vapors which had enveloped her before. She was more like the Nora of former days, and Mrs. Ashton said she felt that she was meeting some charming stranger for the first time.

Although she talked and laughed without restraint, Nora could not entirely forget her ugly thoughts. The least she could hope was that her forced gayety might not be recognized as such by the others, and to judge by the burst of merriment which greeted her efforts, she thought she had succeeded.

Wanda's treble rose above the rest, for she too was making the acquaintance of a new mother, one that attracted by her fascination, and at whom she gazed with eyes full of wonder and delight.

"You are like a butterfly to-day, Nora!" exclaimed Ethel. "You are dressed so beautifully, and you flit about in spirit, like one of those delicate creatures, just as gayly and light-heartedly."

"I feel as if I were having a vacation," she answered smiling. "Like a schoolboy, who has been kept in after hours. As soon as he regains his liberty, he runs about in the sunshine, realizing to the full, the freedom of the open, and the joy of living."

"It is a day when one is glad to be alive," said Emilie.

"It is evidently the day for frivolity," cried Druce, for he could hardly keep his eyes away from his wife, she was so full of charm and alluring mystery for him.

"It's not at all an easy thing to do—well!" said Jessica, as she looked quietly at Nora.

Nora met those shrewd eyes unflinchingly, and she wondered what she really meant. She shrugged her shoulders. She was becoming fanciful.

"I suppose that is a round-about way of paying me a compliment," she suggested smiling faintly. "Thank you!"

"Not at all! So few people seem to realize obvious things like that, especially when they are so extraordinarily—well done."

Nora lowered her eyes. She had been found out then! But she laughed, and Jessica's quick ears detected a faint touch of nervousness in the sound.

Certainly the woman had courage, which was just what Nora herself thought too.

Yet she was the tiniest afraid, for she wondered if there was more than a shade of malice in the old lady. She could not make it out, and it worried her. She must study Miss Hargreaves' nature.

Later on, when they reached the house, Nora bent down and kissed her daughter.

"Bully!" answered Wanda, and her mother had not the heart to correct her. The child kissed her, and ran off to find Janet.

"Anything for me?" inquired Druce, as Nora opened the mail bag, which she noticed lying on the table. "I'm expecting a letter."

"Yes!" she answered, holding it out to him.

He read it with his back turned, and Nora's hand at that moment came in contact with another letter. She drew it out. It also was addressed to her husband. She did not know the hand-writing. What made her do it, she never could tell, but instead of giving him that letter, she quietly slipped it into the front of her dress. Then she was rather frightened.

"It's all right, Nora. My drawing has been accepted by George & Prince!"

"So that's what you wouldn't let me see?"

"Yes, and I'll send them a cheque at once!" And

he ran upstairs, two steps at a time, leaving Nora standing where she was, slightly bewildered.

She took the letter stealthily from her dress. She must give it to him now. Then her courage failed her, for a sudden thought made her fears return with renewed force.

"Was this the letter he had really been expecting?"

She made her way upstairs, and hid the offending envelope beneath the private papers locked away in her desk.

## XII

### DRUCE IN SAN FRANCISCO

DRUCE had arrived in San Francisco, and already started his work. He worked hard, and was in a fair way to make a name for himself, for the man possessed real genius. The firm having recognized his merit, congratulated themselves on having secured his services.

On Saturdays he usually returned to Santa Barbara, and spent Sunday with his wife. When he could not get away, he wrote her that he hoped soon to make money enough to enable her to move to San Francisco. It would be foolish to give up the house in Santa Barbara, which he had taken on a five year lease, and he would not bring his family to town until he could support them in comfort. He was working out a scale of expenses, and it would take some time before he could possibly carry it out, unless some great piece of good luck should turn the tide in his favor, and shorten the period of waiting. His wife must be patient. He was working hard.

He begged her not to come to him, as her presence would distract him. He trusted that soon she would begin a renewal of her own work, and that that, together with the friends she had made, would make life bearable. He wished that they could have gone on longer in the same comfortable way, but he had his work, his life work to do, and the honeymoon had had to come to an end one day. The new friends he had made were not the same as the old and tried ones. They did not understand. He missed his wife's companionship, her help, her advice, her very presence, but this separation had had to be, so why complain? He could only hope soon to be able to afford a town house as well as a house in Santa Barbara, but Santa Barbara would always be home to him.

It all sounded very lonely, and Nora would have been miserable, if she had not thought many times of the letter locked in her desk. Once she had taken it out, and examined its superscription curiously. The writing on the envelope was not refined, it looked more like the handwriting of an uneducated person, but whether it was written by a man or a woman, she could not determine.

She had resisted temptation many times, for it was bad enough to have withheld it, but it would

have been unpardonable to go as far as opening the letter. She justified her action in withholding it, by a system of logic that was more purely personal than feminine, and she was perfectly sincere and honest about it.

She had thought the letter might contain some news it would be best to keep from her husband. She had no reason for thinking so, but the thought having come in a flash, she had acted upon it without further delay. She was accustomed to act quickly, and, ordinarily her judgment was sound. The only thing that was unfortunate in the present instance, was the fact that she could not prove even to herself that she had acted wisely. She could not do so, without opening the letter, and she dared not do that.

If she felt that she had acted for the best, she should have been content, and the loneliness in her husband's letters, almost convinced her that she had acted wisely.

His conduct when they met once a week, or once in two weeks, for he did not come home every week, coincided with the tone of his letters, and further, went a long way to prove to her the complete wisdom of her action.

Other things being equal, it was very natural for Nora to believe absolutely in her husband at this

period of their married life, because she had not been aware of his intentions to Estelle St. Clair. He had come to his senses before matters between them had gone too far, and it was his wife's absolute innocence alone which brought him to a realization of where he was drifting. That he was still seriously in love with Nora, he did not doubt. That love was the most important factor in life, he still believed.

Druce's attitude toward Nora, after breaking with Estelle, had been as sincere as remorse would allow. He did not know that remorse had anything to do with it, he only thought he was sorry, and had repented. It is a common mistake. He did not know, furthermore, that fear had entered into the question, fear of self, and fear of the wife who loved him. If either of these theories had been suggested to him, he would have rejected them with both scorn and something very much like anger. Moreover, he would have felt that such criticism of his righteous conduct was unjust, and to say the least, unfair.

During his hours of leisure, he was faithful to Nora. He went to the theatre, but avoided the pitfall of the supper afterwards. He made friends, but he made it a point never to be intimate with anybody, while he was away from his wife. It

was a bit of gallantry in his nature, that he showed to his wife only.

He was doing the right thing, because he thought it was right, not because he feared to do the wrong. It is a subtle distinction, and interesting both from a moral as well as a psychological standpoint, but it is doubtful whether Druce at the present moment could have recognized the difference.

In the same way, it would have been impossible for Nora to grasp the moral side of her act, nor would she have been capable of distinguishing between right and wrong from a purely psychological viewpoint. Such distinctions were too fine for people who are obeying the dictates of fate.

It is a common enough error, and may happen in the case of most people who are clever, and both Nora and Druce were clever, not only in their own peculiar lines, but generally as the world views cleverness.

Nora's great failing was that she attached too much importance to self. She was too much given to self-analyzation. Her self-control, too, was not her strongest point. Druce erred on the other side. He thought too little of himself, and it made him careless. There is a line to be drawn, and a path to be followed, but both far overstepped it, being apparently unaware that it existed.

Druce's mental attitude was one of self-congratulation that he had thrown off the shackles of a light love, whereas Nora having acted as she did from purely honest motives, was proud of the power of a love which could fight and protect. Both were inflated with a species of pride, because they had overcome obstacles which would have seriously interfered with their happiness.

The fact that he had conquered a love that was purely gross, made him think himself infallible. It increased his conceit enormously. He even went so far as to think that his success in business was a proof that his self-restraint was appreciated in higher quarters.

It was during the height of this exalted condition of mind, that one of the bell-boys came into his office unannounced. He handed him a letter, which he took, but did not open. Instead, he looked at the boy inquiringly.

"Is there any answer?" he asked.

"No, I said you was out of town," was the noncommittal reply.

"What made you say that?" asked McAllister quickly.

"It was a lady brought the note, and she said if you wasn't in, she'd wait until she could see ye. I didn't like the looks of her, and so—"

"I see. What was she like?"

"She had yellow hair, and was dressed kind of funny. But she wasn't your kind sir, so I made up my mind she shouldn't see you. She was a shark, all right, all right."

"How do you know?"

"I could tell by the cut of her clothes. I know 'em well. She came toward me, but she didn't seem to come no nearer, and she had a quiet way of speakin', that wasn't exactly 'con,' but it made me feel she meant business, and no good at that."

Who could this woman be?

"I hope I done right," said the boy, after he had studied Druce impersonally.

"Oh, yes! Perfectly right. You hit nearer the mark than you had any idea of, for—I'm going away to-morrow."

"Ain't ye comin' back?"

"No—I'm going to make other arrangements."

"Ain't you satisfied at our place?"

"Oh, yes! But I've been looking for a smaller place—I hate big caravanseries—"

"What's that, mister?"

"Big hotels. Listen, boy! If that lady comes back, just say I'm still out, will you? I think she's only a dun with a bill. I'll settle her through my

lawyer. That's all. Here, put that in your pocket. I won't be in until late to-night."

"Thanks. Gee, but you're the right sort! Thank you sir, and good luck to you! Good-bye!"

After the boy had gone, Druce closed the door, and sat down again at his desk. He looked closely at the letter. The handwriting was not distinctive, but it had some characteristics that were vaguely familiar. Not enough to be recognized, though. He still looked at the letter, wondering what he had best do with it. If it were something serious, it would only unsettle him for work. If it were not serious, it would annoy him to have attached so much importance to it. On second thoughts, he decided not to read it now. A little delay would do no harm, and besides it would not change whatever might happen.

He unlocked his safe, and took out his despatch box. He opened it with his private pass key, put the letter in, and promptly forgot all about it.

He had dismissed the incident from his mind, but as he made his way along Kearney street, he had an uncomfortable suspicion that he was being followed. He saw a man cross the street, and make in his direction. The man's eyes were on him. He was not mistaken. This was intolerable!

He went into a saloon, and passing through into the back room, made an exit to the street.

It was late when he returned to the hotel, and much later when he awoke the next morning, after a restless night. For some time he avoided the main thoroughfares, and by changing his lodgings, he believed himself safe.

As a matter of fact, Druce had succeeded in making his tracker lose the scent. But this time, he did not forget, for he was afraid, afraid that something yet unforeseen might happen.

## XIII

### MISS JESSICA DISCOURSES

Nora took Druce's suggestion, and invited some people to tea at the club.

It seemed like a new life, but she was growing used to being alone. After her husband left, she was horribly lonely. She missed him, and nothing seemed to make up for his absence. She would gladly have followed him, but he had not wished it, and she understood perfectly that it was pride that prevented him from accepting her money to make a new home.

What would she not have given to help, but she was powerless. She had to take up her life, and order it on new lines, or rather lines that had not developed sufficiently to become familiar. With Wanda, beyond a certain point, she made no headway. The child was obedient and willing, but the love for the mother did not materialize.

She thought about her literary work, but she found it hard to get at it with her one time en-

thusiasm. She had been idle so long, that she felt it impossible for the moment to make a beginning. The desire would return, but she would not force it. She could do better work if she waited until the inclination came naturally. There was nothing to worry about. She must wait, that was all!

The day of her tea-party, Nora sent Wanda and Janet off for the afternoon. The child was to romp, and to be under as little restraint as possible. Janet made it clear to the child that this was her mother's suggestion. The child was young. She was not capable of showing her feelings, of knowing the true from the false, the real from the unreal. So, the mother comforted herself, hoping against hope that all might be well between them. She did not miss a single chance of winning the child's love, but there was no response, not even a suggestion of an echo in the child, of the love that came from the mother's heart.

"When is Druce coming back?" asked Ethel.

"I don't know—" began Nora, smoothing back a stray lock of hair.

"My dear, what a remark to make!" broke in Miss Jessica, raising her hands in pretended horror.

"Why?" inquired Nora, on her guard.

"Well—it sounds as if you did not care—"

"Oh, come!" exclaimed Emilie Dorian, poutingly. "That's rather beyond the mark."

"Beyond what mark?" inquired Miss Hargreaves calmly. "Really, my dear, you talk a great deal, but it has so little sense. Stock phrases are all very well in their proper place, but out of a clear sky to make such a very pointed remark, I don't see how you have the face to do it!"

"Professional jealousy!" laughed Emilie. "But, of course, no one really takes Miss Jessica seriously."

"Oh, don't they?" sneered the old lady, ruffling her feathers. "Oh, don't they, indeed?" she repeated more emphatically. "Why, you little chit—"

"Mercy, Miss Jessica!" exclaimed Nora. "I never heard such an absolutely uncalled for attack."

"It's not a patch on what I *could* say!"

"Then I wouldn't say it!" suggested Ethel, helping herself to another cake.

Miss Hargreaves gasped, but said nothing.

"That would be the wisest thing, I am sure," agreed Mrs. Dorian, plucking up courage.

"I don't know why!" said Miss Hargreaves. "We are all old friends, and we ought to be able to say what we feel. I see no reason why we should stand on ceremony with each other."

"You would make society a collection of people who are playing truth!" began Nora.

"Or Russian scandal!" finished Ethel, smiling sweetly at Miss Jessica, who did not, however look in her direction.

"We might begin now!" suggested she.

"It might be fun!" ventured Emilie, looking about for allies.

"I would describe society as I found it," remarked Miss Jessica, ignoring the intervening speeches, and answering Nora directly.

"Well—begin with Mrs. Dorian!" said Mrs. McAllister.

"Emilie is a good little soul," smiled Jessica acridly. "And that's about all there is to say. Yes—I can't think of anything else."

"Miss Hargreaves, how perfectly horrid you are!" said Emilie, her pretty head on one side, as she glanced at the old lady wistfully.

"Next—Ethel!" continued Jessica. "I think—" And she stopped suddenly.

"Well!"

"She is the best of us, for she's perfectly honest. She's not masquerading, like some people I know."

"Who, for instance?" queried Nora, on the defensive.

"Why you, you dear little fraud!" answered Miss Hargreaves

"In what way?" asked Mrs. McAllister suspiciously.

"You came here under false pretenses—"

"Miss Jessica!" broke in Ethel, leaning forward, and looking angrily at her.

"Not at all!" was the serene answer. "I read a novel or a short story by her", indicating Nora, "and I don't believe she wrote it."

"Why not?" asked Nora, immensely relieved that the conversation had taken this turn. She had feared the old lady intended to attack her social standing in some way through her divorce.

"Because you haven't written a line since you have been here. Now, have you?" Nora frankly admitted that she had not. "Then how do I know that you can write? You ought to prove it!"

"Like the funny man, who was asked to be funny!" was the smiling retort. "But—I can't write on the spur of the moment—just like that!"

Nora made a funny little protesting gesture.

"You could have told us that you wrote!" said Miss Hargreaves; "instead of deceiving us as if you were ashamed of it."

"I'm not at all ashamed of it!"

Miss Hargreaves smiled and looked at Emilie.

"And I'm going to begin again very soon!"

"That's right!" nodded Miss Jessica. "You have a splendid chance while your husband is away—"

"I believe you glory in my husband's absence—you're always speaking of it!"

"No," was the rather indifferent reply. "I didn't intend to give that impression. I only meant what I said."

"Really!" said Ethel, as if surprised, though she was laughing heartily. "You must be ill!"

"I'm perfectly well, and—I'm enjoying myself hugely. You're all like a lot of fish—you rise so easily. The only thing I can say is that it's very poor sport."

And the old woman rose, and waving her hand playfully, moved away, chuckling.

"I never know whether Miss Hargreaves is in earnest or not!" exclaimed Nora.

"Neither do I!" murmured Emilie.

"She's rarely in earnest, unless she has an object," said Ethel. "But, I will say this, I'd rather be on her side than opposed to her. She does speak very plainly at times."

"But she has a good heart!" said Nora.

"Oh, about that, there is no doubt!" nodded Ethel emphatically. "I've had proofs—personal proofs, too—of that."

Nora looked inquiringly at Mrs. Ashton, but she shook her head.

"That would be telling, and I'm nothing if I'm not discreet."

"Which is often the better part of valor!" suggested Emilie timidly. "I really must be going!"

Mrs. Dorian kissed both Ethel and Nora, and then walked away, looking from left to right to see what impression she was making.

"She's pretty, but—" Ethel paused and laughed. "I'll walk along a little way with you, dear, if you are going home."

Nora, somehow feeling easier in her mind about Miss Jessica, rose, and they strolled off, bowing to acquaintances, as they threaded their way among the tables which almost choked up the verandah.

When, however, later on, Mrs. McAllister entered her own room, she looked about her rather wearily. It had been nice at the club, but—was she becoming discontented with her home? No, for it scarcely seemed like home. It was not what she had thought it would be. Her husband was away so much. She never knew when he was coming. She never knew now how long he would remain away, or how long he would stay. It was so different from what she had pictured. Ah, the picture she had drawn of their life together! A

place where they would work in common, after the honeymoon was over. And now, here they were separated, he working in one place, and she, idle. Why was she idle? She must be idle no longer. Wanda had not come in. It was a good chance. She would begin now. Acting on the spur of the moment, she caught up a writing pad and a pencil. She felt the hot blood rising in her cheeks. Was that what her work really meant? No, it did not! It was her life work. There had been an interruption. That was all. How should she end her novel? Ah, that must be thought out! How could she do it alone? Druce had told her so much. She had relied so much on his judgment. Without him she felt helpless.

How she longed for him. She loved him so passionately. God! why was he not here?

What was it he had said? Friends and work! She had had the friends, and now, there was work! If she did not have that, what would there be left? Nothing, for Wanda she could not grasp, and there was nothing else. Nothing else! What a situation for a woman! What a reflection for a woman who was supposed to be happily married! Had she given up the past for this? Ah! There was still work. Work, yes, she must work! Work! Work!

## XIV

### MRS. MCALLISTER TRIES TO WRITE AGAIN

Nora sought a secluded bench in the garden. On her lap was her pad, and in her hand a pencil.

The title of her novel was 'Paying the Debt,' and it was about three quarters finished. The first half was entirely completed, carefully revised, and ready for the press.

This had been done by Druce and herself in the old days, before their marriage.

Nora's eyes wandered from the sheet, which still remained blank. The memory of those days held her. She smiled at the remembrance of her companionship with Druce, frowned at the recollection of Bradford, and resolutely repressed her true feelings when she thought for the moment of her son.

Those days were far away, and from the pain came the balm of Druce's presence in them. What should she have done without him to comfort her?

As if awakening from a dream, her eyes re-

turned to the sheet on her lap. She tried to take up her work, but could not. Her mind was barren of inspiration. It had been so long since she had worked regularly day by day.

This was not the way to shake off the shackles that held her. She must try to settle down into the old routine again. She sauntered into the house, and wandered about in search of a suitable room in which to work. At last she chose a small one next to the linen closet. It would answer admirably, and there was a chest of drawers, where she could keep her papers.

She went down to her own room, opened a small box, and took out all her manuscripts. She would have them taken up to her new workshop. She smiled as she turned to ring the bell. On the way she caught a glimpse of her typewriter, still unpacked. That must go up also. Why should she not take all these things up herself? The box was not very heavy. The case with the machine in it she felt she could manage by herself.

She dragged the box to the bottom of the stairs, and by dint of pulling and shoving, finally succeeded in placing it in the corner of the little room upstairs near the window. She went down for the leather case, and with difficulty lifted it and took it to its new resting place.

Everything was ready, yet not a stroke of writing marred the whiteness of the paper before her. Ideas would not come. She had been away from her work too long. She did not know what to do. In the old days her mind had been active, teeming with ideas. Now, themes were wanting, or would not come at her bidding. Dreams there were, but they remained dreams.

It was like a child when it is called in the morning. He turns over with a sleepy smile, and sleeps again, the smile fades, though the flush of sleep remains. Once more he dreams. Once more reality passes into unreality. The passage of time is lost. Again he is called. The smile reappears and fades again, and sleep is once more the victor.

So it was with Nora. She looked into space. She dreamed. She drummed on the table impatiently, but it was no use. Work she could not.

She put down her pencil. She opened the drawer, and drew out her fragmentary notes. She had reached a point where she was puzzled. There was nothing to do, but read the manuscript over from the beginning. In this way she might be able to pick up the thread that had been lost.

She spread out the manuscript and began to read, carefully and with growing concentration. It was easy to read, because there was nothing to cor-

rect. She and Druce had gone over all this carefully in the old days.

How long ago that seemed! So many things had happened since then! The past was far away. Its ugly angles had softened, and only the pleasant incidents stood out clearly. At times, she raised her head, and smiled. Some line brought back the memory of the time when it had been written. That was Druce's suggestion. This had been hers. It was extraordinarily well done. The rest of the book should be equally good.

The object of this novel was to teach a great truth, but the difficulty lay in the fact, unknown to the writer, that she was proceeding from a false premise. She had reckoned without taking into consideration, an exceedingly potent and negligible factor, the relation of the sexes. But it was a side issue, not the main one. She wrote in no ambiguous terms that she was a firm believer in the doctrine of platonic friendship. That she could be wrong, or possibly mistaken, her exaggerated ego prevented her from seeing.

The fundamental key-note of her story was that nothing could prevent a woman from accomplishing her destiny. To do this effectively, she must use the tools ready at hand. It was a very simple matter, and only had to be carried out by the

mechanical process of filling in. Her plot was like a mold. She was to pour in a part of her brain. That there could be any difficulty in this, she had had no inkling up to the present time. The reason for this was simple.

She had her own peculiarly personal and original method of constructing a novel. She scorned to follow out any recognized plan. In a play, yes, for there were rules to be observed, rules that were clear, but in a book the scope was larger, the possibilities less restricted, the field more extended, and one was not limited. One had a freer hand, in fact, and so one discovered one's own method.

Nora believed that in announcing herself as a disciple of platonic friendship, she was stating her proposition, but as she was supposed to be paying a debt, it could not be clear how this was so. A mystery is all very well, but it should not remain a mystery too long, and it must be effectually recognized as a mystery from the start.

Of course she admitted that Druce had been a great help, but it had been a mistake for him to suggest the possibility of the artist and the young painter falling in love with each other. The converse was obvious from Nora's point of view, for as she reflected, she had married Druce, and he had helped her. She comforted herself by acknowl-

edging that the two cases were different. Druce had fallen in love with her, and she with him, but the man in her book must not fall in love with her heroine, it would spoil the whole scheme.

Her idea of paying the debt that a man owes to society in return for his existence was, that the person so benefitting had nothing else to give. A woman of intellect gave the product of her brain. It was a finer gift, and this was what her heroine had started out to do.

How well she remembered the discussion she and Druce had had on this very scene between the two artists! Love had entered into the situation entirely unexpectedly, Nora being unaware that the woman was herself, and the man, Druce. She had taken herself as the heroine because she had an object in life, a debt to pay to society, and Druce was in a measure responsible for that, for he was always preaching about the human touch in a book, and that it was essential to its ultimate success. What could be more human than a character taken from life, and in the present case, it had exactly fitted in.

It had been done unconsciously, because it seemed so natural. Druce being at hand, had fitted in the same way. When the real character began making love, the idea, all unsuspected, worked itself into

the story, and now it would not, it could not be taken out. Besides, it was so beautifully written, it seemed a pity to strike out what might be admired, her masterpiece, doubtless. Druce had suggested the title to suit the situation, but to this Nora would not listen, for it would destroy the fundamental thought, the deep truth she had set out to expound. He had suggested calling the book 'Taking Chances,' laughingly adding that if she did marry the man, the heroine might find that he had feet of clay after all.

Her answer was that if he were going to treat serious matters, matters that meant so much to her, in a light way, he might as well not suggest anything. It did not help her to bring forward ideas of that kind. They were so utterly opposed to her own. They were not possible. They were almost absurd. She did concede that her characters sometimes became unmanageable, and both did and said things that she had not intended, but those were cases where it did not make much difference. The present case mattered exceedingly. This situation must be conquered, and her obstreperous character held in check.

"If Druce were only here!" This was the prayer she breathed from her heart, but its ending was too truly feminine to fit in with its divine side: "I be-

lieve I could convince him that he was wrong."

As if in answer to her heartfelt desire, she heard a voice calling out from below:

"Nora! where are you?"

It was Druce, and he had returned after a longer absence than usual.

She sprang to her feet, ran to the top of the stairs, and then stopped. She remembered that he had neither written nor wired her of his coming.

"What had happened?" she wondered.

## XV

### WHY DID SHE DO IT?

NORA descended the staircase slowly. She reached the first floor, and paused again at the top of the last flight. She seemed to be listening.

"Yes, who is it?"

Her voice sounded unnatural, yet it was impersonal. There was, however, an undercurrent of something unusual in the peculiar timbre; it was as if she were repressing herself, her real feelings, but strove to conceal some mood she did not wish recognized.

"Nora!"

"Yes, I am coming!"

She came down quickly, her eyes downcast, when she reached the hall. Then she looked up into her husband's eyes.

"You never wrote me—you never telegraphed—"

"But—aren't you glad to see me?"

Nora noticed that his glance wavered for a moment before he looked away, and again she wondered what had happened.

"Of course, I'm glad to see you, but—I'm taken by surprise. I didn't expect you—"

Druce made some unintelligible reply, and turned away.

During that moment, Nora studied him critically. As in a flash she saw that he had changed. Something had happened. He did not seem exactly worried, but he was paler than usual, and his action when he finally turned away to hang up his coat, which he still carried over his arm, was jerky and spasmodic. This was not like him, for he was usually calm and self-possessed, even as his outward appearance was at this moment.

It would have taken a practiced eye to detect these slight changes, but Nora had prepared herself to find something out of the ordinary in Druce, and was not unduly taken aback, though she could not imagine what had caused it.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

Her voice sounded mechanical in her own ears, but he did not seem to notice it.

"Fancy my having forgot it!"

He kissed her, but she drew back gently. She stooped to pick up her handkerchief, so he did not see her face. She had flushed deeply, and then grown suddenly white. Even his kiss was different. What did it mean?

"Will you have some tea?" she asked. "You look tired—"

"I am not tired," he protested somewhat vehemently. "I mean—I've been very busy lately—"

"Yes—have you been getting on—well?"

She averted her eyes, and moved along slowly to the library. Druce looked at her wistfully.

"Very well," he answered quickly. But he was annoyed at the question.

She affected not to notice it.

"You must have some tea—it is the best thing when one is—overtired."

Druce looked at her sharply. She had changed her tactics. She would try to find out later what was wrong.

"Shall we make it like the English teas we—used to have?"

She put a touch of tenderness into her question.

She wished to discover whether anything had come between them. Whether he thought that he had any cause for complaint against her. She had invoked the memories of those other days to find out. If she failed, there were other ways of learning what it was that was on his mind. If it were not she who had offended, then she must find out what other cause it could be.

"Go into the library, dear!" she said. "I shall bring in the tray myself, as I used to do."

She looked at him affectionately, but he was preoccupied, and had already disappeared into the room she had indicated.

She sighed, and went to the back of the house to superintend the preparation of the tray. The maid carried it into the hall, and then Nora took it into the room where her husband sat in a deep chair, his shoulders hunched, his brow furrowed with evident anxiety. Nora, pretending not to have seen anything out of the ordinary, came forward slowly.

"Druce, do take this tray!" she said, with a charming assumption of gayety and a touch of coquetry. "It is heavier than I thought, or else—I am getting older!"

Druce jumped up. His lassitude vanished instantly. He took the tray from her, and she cleared a table on which to put it. This done, he surprised her by taking her in his arms, and kissing her passionately.

"It is I who have changed—"

"What do you mean? When you kiss me like that—I can't believe it!"

She had buried her head upon his shoulder, so she did not see the look of pain that shot across his face.

"Now, do let me serve the tea! It's one lump, isn't it?" she asked, sitting down. "You're almost like a stranger. I feel almost as if I were having an affair with a man who was not—my husband."

Nora looked down, and smiled, but she knew in her heart, that Druce's answering smile he forced to meet the lightness of her mood. He was gazing at her in horror, but just as suddenly he pulled himself together. He must be on his guard. The memory of a letter he had received recently, still haunted him. It had hinted at strange things, things that he had forgotten, of people whom he had thought dead and buried.

Nothing definite had been said, but it had stirred up the embers of a dead past in a way that annoyed him. He had not been frightened, because the whole thing had been so absurd. The letter had purposed to be from a woman he had thought dead. It was a leaf from the past. It was not written by the woman herself, but on her behalf. It had all been exceedingly vague, but it had upset him.

Suppose Jenny were alive! Suppose the woman he had married was alive! He had been half drunk when the ceremony had taken place, and he had deserted her a few days later, and then had heard

that she had been killed in an accident on the railroad. Since then, he had heard nothing until the arrival of the mysterious letter. It was very strange, but it could not be true. It might be blackmail, but who could have known the circumstances? No one that he had even known. It could not be that Edith had not died, for then, Nora, sitting opposite to him was not his wife. He was a bigamist, but not by his own fault.

"Here is your tea!" said Nora, staring at him curiously. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing at all!" And by force of will he took the cup from her with a steady hand. Hot as it was, he gulped it down, and set the cup down on the corner of the table.

"There are some sandwiches—cake—fruit—"

"Yes, thank you—it all looks very nice."

He helped himself to a small sandwich, and then, pulled out his cigarette-case. Nora noticed that he smoked furiously.

"I believe I'll take a walk before dinner," he said suddenly. "It will do me good—freshen me up—make me feel like a new man, you know!"

Without waiting for permission he walked from the room.

Nora stared at him.

"It seems almost as if he didn't want to be with me!" she murmured beneath her breath.

Could it be that he was only worried over his business? Had he been working hard, too hard, and did he fear that he was not going to succeed? She could not tell, because he had not given her any information. She had nothing to go on. She could only imagine, and that was so misleading, so unsatisfactory. She could imagine the worst, or she could deride the fears that were slowly coiling themselves about her heart. She could not be certain. That was the worst of it.

Perhaps Druce was ill, and was trying to keep it from her. Perhaps his illness came from overwork. That would explain a good deal. His pre-occupation, his irritability, and his restlessness.

Perhaps he was the victim of some imaginary enemy. Perhaps this was what was troubling him. An enemy hits in the dark, and he was afraid because he could not see his foe. He could only guess who it was, or perhaps fear, but no, Druce was not a coward. He would not endure in silence like a woman, suffering needlessly. He would not remain passive, he would strike. No, Druce, whatever his faults, was not the man to act the part of a villain. He would rather die first.

Suddenly Nora started to her feet. An ugly thought struck her. What of the letter she had kept from him? Had he received another in San Francisco? Could the letter be from a woman?

On the spur of the moment, she rushed upstairs. The door into Druce's dressing-room was closed. She crossed the room, and listened eagerly. Druce was there. He must have returned unexpectedly. He was muttering to himself. Detached words, sometimes curses, she heard, but she could not make out the sense of what he was saying. She stood it, as long as she could, and then she stretched out her hand toward the door-knob.

At this moment, she heard Druce's door open, and next she heard his steps going quietly down stairs.

Then she entered stealthily, and looked about her. The room was in order. Nothing was wrong, or out of place. She thought she must have been mistaken, for she thought she had heard him tossing things about. She walked over to the dressing-table. One or two of the drawers were partly open, and they were empty.

What had been bothering him, for she had certainly heard angry mutterings! Several fragments of paper were lying on the centre table, and she examined them. They belonged to an envelope.

She made out a part of Druce's name. It was addressed to his lodgings in San Francisco. The handwriting reminded her of a specimen she had seen before.

She walked back to her own room, her eyes on the pieces of paper, which she was studying. Suddenly she went to her desk. There was a possibility. Perhaps she was mistaken. She must compare the writing on that other letter she had locked up so long ago, and which she had almost forgotten.

The two were absolutely similar. She replaced the letter in her desk, dropping it as if it burned her. She must find Druce. He must explain.

No, she would not speak to him now. She was afraid. She must not let him suspect. She would act as if nothing had happened. She went down stairs in search of him. She looked about for him, but could find him nowhere. Perhaps he had gone out for another walk, before dinner.

Before she left the room to go down to dinner, she took a final and irrevocable decision. She must speak to Druce to-night. She could not bear this suspense any longer.

She rang for a servant, and when she appeared, asked where Mr. McAllister was.

"He went out, madam. He said he would be dining at the club."

"Of course, Mary. I think I must be losing my mind. I had forgotten. I'll ring for dinner later."

"I forgot to say that the master had his bag with him."

"Yes—he said—he was going to take his things over to the club to-night. He is going—to play golf—to-morrow."

# XVI

## WORKING UNDER PRESSURE

DRUCE'S departure had been sudden and unexpected. He had received a telegram at the club where he had decided to dine. His telegrams were always sent to the club, and he had strolled over there, and then returned to pack his bag and return there for dinner.

The telegram read: "Why do you not answer my letters? Join me Denver old quarters.' It was unsigned, but from its peculiar wording, he could not doubt but it came from the woman he had thought dead. He did not accept this decision as final, however. It must be investigated, followed up, and proved, before he lost heart completely.

Druce was not a coward, but he felt that he could not face his wife just now. He must be by himself. He must go back to San Francisco, and work out this clue. If it led to what he feared, the truth, there was a remedy he could use, a desperate one, to be sure, but a certain one. He would kill himself!

If he had two wives, both should be widows, and perhaps his act might save the innocent one by closing the lips of the other. He could only hope that this would be the case, should he be forced to the wall.

At the last moment, he deliberated whether he should go directly to Denver. No, that might precipitate matters, and there still remained hope, that they might turn out better than at present seemed possible. Besides, he felt safer in San Francisco. It seemed better to be in a large city. One could conceal one's self there better, if necessary.

He wrote to Nora that he had been called away very suddenly on business. He hoped to return to Santa Barbara very soon. He would be in a better humor then, for he had been worried, but soon hoped to remove the cause, which was connected with business. He sent much love, and begged her not to worry about him. He was really all right, and sorry to have been so cross, but it could not be helped.

There was not a word about the possibility of her joining him. There was not a word about his making any money. He mentioned business, and that was all. Nora answered the letter, and professed complete understanding of the situation. A woman understands moods better than a man, she

wrote, but she did not add that a man rarely has moods without a cause. She said that she was trying to work at her book, but neglected to say that she had accomplished nothing, or that she would have liked to talk over the scene they had so often discussed.

Somehow, she felt that Druce would not be receptive. Perhaps such matters would appear trivial to him now. He was so different from the old Druce, but here she pressed her lips firmly together, and forced herself to think of something else. This was a dangerous moment, and she needed all her courage to live her daily life without losing her hold over herself.

She lived from moment to moment, expecting she knew not what, and still nothing happened. Druce's letters sounded more contented. He referred to things that were pleasant. This was easy enough in a letter, but not so simple a matter when he and Nora were face to face. But Nora did not dare to question him. She felt, too, that any unwary action on her part, might bring matters to a head. This would ruin any chances of happiness that might remain for her, and as nothing happened to disturb her husband seriously as far as she could observe, it was more tactful, to let matters alone.

She did not deny, even to herself that she was unhappy, but she feared to do anything that might make her more unhappy still, for this cloud might pass away. So, this wretchedly unhappy woman endured, and hid her grief, taking up the routine of her life as best she could.

Druce thinking that he was doing the same thing, waited with what patience he could. As a matter of fact, nothing happened. Letters and telegrams ceased. It was very mysterious. Nothing was forwarded from Santa Barbara, either from his house or the club. Nothing came to his lodgings. No word came to the general delivery. He could not understand it. What had happened? As time went on, he breathed more freely, scarcely daring to hope that his troubles were over. He gave himself up to business with greater zest.

He managed to pay frequent visits to Santa Barbara, but as he never suggested making the move to San Francisco, Nora decided it would be unwise to take the initiative. She would live altogether in the present, and trust in the future. Her husband loved her. They were happy, not so happy as at first, but still happy, and so life went on, more or less smoothly.

She realized that the years were passing swiftly.

She was an older and a wiser woman, for those same years had taught her much.

Life became a routine for them both, and each accepted with gratitude, the crumbs of happiness which fell to their share.

The routine of her life applied equally to her efforts with Wanda. They reached a certain point, and there they stopped. Nora could not make any further headway, for the young girl, with a strange reserve, held her mother from her, not openly, but secretly, surely.

As far as her writing went, Nora did not have the spirit or the determination to make the effort. This was true, as to the novel, though she did write a number of short stories, which she sent to various magazines under an assumed name. She had not the heart to sign her own name. It really made very little difference as to whether the stories were accepted or not. It made her happier to work.

The change in Nora had been so gradual, that she did not seem to be aware of it at all. To her friends, she seemed the same charming, vivacious woman. They thought she was happy, and wrote to their friends to that effect. Druce came and went. His visits were part of the accepted scheme of things, but she did not complain. She loved

him, and she felt sure of his love. What more could any woman want?

Nora had fallen into a rut, but it was an orderly one, and she lived in its narrow limits without friction, therefore without thought of anything different. As long as she had Druce and Wanda, and the love of both, all they could give, she had no further desire.

She was like a woman in a dream, and she was happy. She no longer fought, as at first, against the decrees of fate, she no longer considered them unjust, she accepted them as inevitable.

Druce, being a man, had not arrived at this forced state of mental serenity without many wrestlings of spirit. He had chafed, shown his irritation, and then was obliged to apologize to his wife for his bad temper. Druce only saw in his wife, the sweetness and tenderness of the woman he still loved. That was enough for him. With her there was a perfect peace.

His work, which had become more and more absorbing, helped him to forget, and he plunged into it with feverish activity. But he was accomplishing great things, for the best results are often produced at high pressure.

If Nora ever found anything to complain of, it was because she had no children by her husband.

In the beginning, she had planned to devote her life to them, but now she accepted the fact with her usual placidity and resignation.

She was happy in the society of her friends. She loved her daughter, and got out of her what she could. Her husband she loved, and there seemed to be nothing lacking in the present scheme of her daily life to warrant any apprehension that it would not last.

Miss Jessica Hargreaves had proved herself a very pleasant and lasting help in this time of trouble. Ethel Ashton had told the truth about her. She always did the right thing, she was never in the way, and she was ever at hand when she was needed. Whether the old lady had an inkling that anything was wrong, for her intuitions were invariably correct, it is difficult to say, but she could not have been kinder or more helpful, if she had known. She was no longer bitter or scornful.

She was a friend, but how much of a one, Nora did not know, for Miss Jessica's efforts were untiring and too impersonal to cause comment, or even notice. She was the good samaritan, but she would not have wished her ministrations to be seen, still less to be remarked. Some people thought that she had had a love affair in her youth, and that it had been serious. That the bitterness had re-

mained, when the affair had come to an end, proved that she had not forgotten, that she could not forget, but in another's trouble, she had sunk self, and allowed the tender buds of kindness to spring forth from the seeds of sympathy, which lay almost buried in her apparently crooked and warped nature.

When Druce was in Santa Barbara, Miss Jessica came but seldom, but when Nora was alone, she was not often absent from the house, where she supposed that she was welcome. Nora, after the first feeling of surprise, found her friend indispensable.

When Druce remained away beyond the usual time, Miss Jessica had something to suggest for amusement or recreation.

Druce had been gone for over six weeks, and Nora was worried. This time she sent for her good friend, and while waiting for her to arrive, she started a letter to her husband.

"Dearest Druce," she wrote. "Don't forget that next Wednesday is the fifth anniversary of our wedding. It would please me if you could manage to be here—"

She paused, and then, out of a clear sky, the tears came.

Miss Hargreaves, who entered at this moment,

came forward, and taking Nora by the hand, led her to a sofa.

"My dear!" she said softly. "I am an older woman, and I have seen a great deal of life, more than most people suspect. I have been studying you for some time, and you are not happy. Don't interrupt me! To-morrow, you and I are going to work out that chapter that is bothering you."

# XVII

## SETTLING THE QUESTION

DRUCE was seated at his desk in the office, poring over the half completed sketch of a terraced garden, which he had been commissioned to work out in connection with a country house he had been building for a rich client. His feet were bent back, and held in place by one of the rungs of his high stool. His drawing pencil lay beside him, for his head was supported by both hands, as he stared fixedly down at his pad.

Finally he threw back his head and yawned. What a bore it was that commercialism was forced by existing conditions into the realm of art! He felt annoyed that his own sound judgment should not be taken, in this matter, without question. As it was, his ideas had to be modified, for it had been distinctly stipulated that not more than a certain sum should be expended on this part of the work. He did not see how it could be done, and had honestly tried to satisfy his eccentric client. An added

difficulty was the fact that his ideas and those of the owner of the house were widely divergent. How to bring them into focus was a problem that required much thought and careful consideration.

The fact was that Druce had not as yet learned his lesson, or rather he refused to recognize it as such, and that was, that it is often more diplomatic to realize that the wishes of rich and influential patrons must sometimes be greater than the art he loved, that is, if he ever expected to eke out a living, or at last make a start in his chosen profession.

Finally he came to the conclusion that he had in a measure reached a stone wall, and he must bring his work to a temporary halt. It would do no good to go on, until some new point of view presented itself. He pushed aside the pad, and turning to a chest of drawers, took out the detail work of the cornice, for the house was not entirely completed. Perhaps he could manage to retrench somewhere either inside or outside of the house, without wounding his artistic sensibilities, solving the vexed problem in this way. If he succeeded, the matter might be adjusted in deference to the wishes of both parties to the contract.

While Druce was working out his plans, his wife was wrangling over her novel with Miss Hargreaves. The latter very justly observed that to

retain the lover would be to defeat the real object of the book. Nora refused to yield. Miss Jessica held that if her friend felt that way about such an exceedingly crucial point, she had best stop, for it was clear to her, that Nora's powers of discernment were not so sure as before. Nora first stared, and then was convinced that she was mistaken.

"I cannot write!" she admitted drearily. "Some vital spark seems to have died within me. I shall have to give up this work. I have been forcing an interest in it for some time. It does not seem to mean so much to me as it did. I cannot understand what has happened!"

"Perhaps you are—tired!" But Nora looked dreamily out of the window, and Miss Jessica wondered whether she had heard.

"I have always been convinced that a man and a woman who had a common interest in art, were in no danger of falling in love with each other—" said Nora, after a pause.

"That might be true, if the man was equally in earnest—"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. But so few men are!"

"I don't understand—"

Miss Hargreaves smiled at the irritability in

Nora's tone, and leant forward, as she spoke.

"Why—that all this might not have happened—" she quibbled weakly.

"All what?"

"All these questions that vex you, or that you think, do."

"Do speak plainly for once!"

"I will. If you hadn't got this absurd notion in your head that writing was your mission in life—you are so unnecessarily intense and full of self—you would have been a great deal happier in the long run. Then again, you did not exercise enough self-control—"

"I was forced by circumstances to consider what seemed wisest—"

"What's that got to do with self-control? There you go again, straight off the handle—"

"I'm very unhappy!"

"I am sorry, but one day, you will learn the truth. Listen! You have been following the line of least resistance, believing it to be the only one, when it was merely the easiest way. Now, what you ever married Druce McAllister for—"

"You've no right—" began Nora indignantly.

"You know you've been living in a fool's paradise!"

"How dare you suggest that—I am not the—happiest woman in the—world?"

Miss Jessica looked at the flushed face, and sighed.

"You are right! I had no business to meddle, and—"

"We won't say any more about it, then!"

"No!"

Miss Hargreaves, seeing that she had failed to awaken Nora, took her departure. There was one hope left. Perhaps her words would bear fruit in due season, but perhaps, too, they had fallen on barren ground!

Meanwhile Druce in distant San Francisco still pored over his papers.

The office boy came in and laid down a letter on the desk beside him, but he was too absorbed even to notice that any one had come in. Suddenly he smiled, and leaning back, stretched his arms above his head. He had solved the problem!

Taking up his specifications again, his eye fell on the letter. He recognized the handwriting as the same one he had seen on previous letters, and he turned white.

The blow had fallen!

There were several matters he must attend to at once. He must write to his wife, and make a

clean breast of his former marriage. As God was his judge, he had thought his wife dead when he married his beloved Nora. This was good-bye. He loved her, but he dared not live with this sin on his soul. When she received this, he would be dead by his own hand! It was the only way! He rang for the boy.

"Post this, will you, as you go out?" And his voice did not falter. "You needn't wait! Go out the other way, and lock the door! I have my key. That is all—good-bye! I mean—good-night!"

He waited until he was alone, listening with strained attention. He heard the door of the other office bang, and he started to his feet. It was not to be so easy, after all.

He looked piteously about the room, and his throat contracted. Yet it would have to be done. He had loved Nora, and he felt that she had brought out the best that was in him, but now he must give her up. He had no right to her. But it had not been his fault. He had that thought to comfort him.

He found the other letter. He laid the two envelopes side by side. What need to open them? What good would it do? He would learn nothing new. It would only be turning the scalpel in an

open wound, a wound that would never heal. No, it was best to burn them, and this he did, scattering the ashes about, so that not a vestige should remain, not a shadow of proof exist of what he had been, against his will.

And now, to make an end of himself! He sat down to think about it. He looked toward the drawer in which he always kept his pistol. No, he could not choose that way. It was too brutal, too ugly! Even at this awful moment, his love of the beautiful remained his ruling passion. His deliberations were calm as far as outward appearance went, but his nerves were under a terrible tension, though he was unaware of this; else he could never have gone through to the bitter, inevitable end.

He paced the room, his brows furrowed. At times, he stared about him, fixedly, almost suspiciously.

How should he kill himself? he asked himself in desperation, more than once, but no solution presented itself.

Poison? No, that was too lingering. The room was lighted by electricity, and as he glanced at the fixtures, he saw gas attachments also. Strange that he had never noticed the jets before! His decision was made instantly. But it was the work

of many hours to stop up every cranny, every outlet where air might enter. It was done at last, and he seated himself in a comfortable chair, with every jet wide open. It was a luxurious way to die! Ideas came unbidden, but they were elusive and fragmentary.

Presently, he became conscious of a loud noise. He must prevent that. Again, he seemed unable to breathe. How unpleasant that was! Ah, it was unbearable. God, he must have air. He tried to rise, but he could not. He lay there without a struggle. Sensation was almost gone. He was very drowsy. His head fell forward. He slept.

# XVIII

## THE MEASURE METED

"MOTHER, this is my fourteenth birthday—" began Wanda.

Nora, who was brushing her hair looked around at her daughter inquiringly.

"And I am of age, according to California law!" continued the girl, her eyes curiously bright.

Nora noticed that the child was very much excited, and wondered why such a simple fact as a birthday should move her so strongly. Usually she said nothing on such occasions. What could it mean?

"So, as I am of age—I've decided to go back to my—father! I've written to him, and I'm leaving to-day. My ticket is bought, and—"

"Wait, for God's sake! I must speak to you. You can not—you must not leave me. Wanda! Wanda!"

Nora stretched out her hands imploringly, but the child shook her head, and smiled scornfully.

"It's no use, I'm going!"

"Wait—there are things I must say to you—things I must explain—"

"What things?" asked the child bluntly.

"Oh, sit down!" moaned the mother; "and, don't look at me like that—I can't bear it—I can't bear it!"

Wanda, after a moment's hesitation, sat down as she was bidden.

"Listen, my child! I love you, and you are all that I have—all that really belongs to me—"

"You have Mr. Druce—what more do you want?"

"Oh, Wanda, don't speak to me in that hard way—have pity! have pity! I am so unhappy. Don't you care—don't you care?"

"I am sorry you are unhappy, but it is your own fault—"

"I know it—but—Wanda, you are no longer a child. Don't you see that Druce has gone away, he has left me—alone. If you go, I shall have no one—no one."

"But what makes you think that Mr. Druce isn't coming back? I thought he had gone to make a home for you. Mr. Dorian told me he was doing very well. He'll soon have enough money to buy a house in town. You'll like the change. I'm sure you will."

"MY LIFE HAS BEEN ONE LONG, BITTER MISTAKE!"

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"Wanda, you must not leave me! Sometimes, I think Druce may not be coming back—that my happiness has all been a dream. Perhaps it is a dream, and I shall wake to find the past here again? Ah, if I only could!"

"A lot of good that would do you, you who left my father—"

"That's what I wish to say to you—what I wish to try to explain. It won't be easy. Perhaps if I don't look at you, it may make it less difficult, and you must not interrupt. You will just listen very attentively, and look somewhere else—don't look at me! Promise me that you won't look at me—dear—promise!"

"Just as you say, but I'm going soon. It'll be good-bye, good-bye between you and me, mother, and—I must tell the truth—I can't pretend any more —I shan't be sorry. I'm going back to Daddy and Eliot, and I'm going to be happy at last. You've tried to do what you could to make me happy, but it wasn't any use. You failed, but I thank you just the same. I can't kiss you—I can't act any more, so there's an end of it!"

Nora knelt before her daughter. She could not stay the cruel words, for she felt that they were true. She began to speak slowly at first, but as she went on, her words fell from her lips fever-

ishly, at times, incoherently, for she was growing desperate. She must try to retrieve herself at this crucial moment. She must make another effort to keep her.

"I married your father, dear, when I was very unhappy. I believed that my mission was to write. I was young, and believed myself of greater importance than I really was. I was just a woman with ambition to succeed, but I thought that love was not necessary to further my desires. You think me a sinful woman, but—don't answer, and don't look at me! I married your father for a home, and though I did not know it—for love. When he did not give me love, I should have been relieved, but I was not. I was unsatisfied, and I believed that it was because I did not have enough success with my work. I had always thought of my work, ever since I began to write. I could think of nothing else, at least I thought I could not. I wanted sympathy in that. Your father could not give it to me, so I fancied I was misunderstood, and that I could not bear to live with him any longer. I thought I did not love him, but, God forgive me! I believe I loved him from the first. Do you understand how that can be? To be in love and not know it? No, don't answer! I was blind, because I could only think of myself—

of my work—don't you see, but you must—you say nothing—I asked you not to—but you must be beginning to understand, you do, don't you? You need not answer, unless you care to—I shall understand. I cannot complain if you don't—it has all been my fault from the beginning. I left your father, because I believed that I needed love, that I had never had it, and Druce gave it to me. You are not old enough to understand, but his love was different from any other love I had ever known. It swept me off my feet, and I believed that I was happy for the first time in my life. But, dear, it has all been a bubble—like the kind you used to blow with a clay pipe, when you were very little, dear, and now it has burst. It has taken a long time to disappear, years, dearest little daughter, but I have learnt my lessons! I wronged your father. I wronged you and Eliot, and I am sorry. If you leave me, you will take away the only love I have left, the only real love. I would make amends, but it is too late. What I have done, for that I must suffer, and do suffer a hundred fold. It is just, it is the law. I have lost the power to write, and if you go, I shall feel that I have almost lost the power to live. Wanda, dear, don't leave me—you won't—you know too, that I have lost my last friend in death—Sheeda Macaulay! You won't

leave me, my darling, will you, after all I've told you, and it's been so hard—so hard. Wanda—Wanda!"

She looked up at the chair where Wanda had been sitting, and it was empty! The child had gone.

With dry eyes, she stared into the fire for a long time. Then her glance fell upon two letters. They were lying on the dressing-table. She took up the first. One look was enough. The writing was in the same hand as that other letter, the one hidden in her desk. She would read them both. The first one, and then, this. There could be no harm. She opened her desk, and drew out the letter, which was slightly discolored.

The opening sentence told the story. Druce had been married before, and, oh heavens! was still married when he went through the ceremony with her. She was not married to him at all!

She sat down at the dressing-table, and began brushing her hair, regularly, like an automaton. She went on brushing—brushing—brushing!

Her eyes wandered. What was it she was seeking? It was the other letter. She was becoming confused. How foolish! The letter was from Druce. She read his letter. It left her unmoved. She seemed to have lost the power of feeling. She had loved this man, and now he was dead. He

had a wife already,when he had married her. It had not been his fault. No, it had not been his fault. But that did not make matters any better for her. Even if she still loved him she would have no right to love him, for she was not his wife, never had been his wife. She passed her hand wearily across her forehead.

The last letter was left to read. She opened it. It was addressed to her. Why was that? Because the writer said that Druce would not answer, and she wished to make atonement before she died! Druce had married before, but it had been to her sister Jenny, and she was dead. The writer went on to say that she had been poor, starving, and had been tempted to this great sin because of her poverty. Then she had been ill, and unable to follow it up, thank God. Now she was dying of an incurable disease, but before her Maker took her, she wanted to make amends if she could.

Nora read the closing words:—

"I feared that you might hear, and I could not bear that you should suffer, for you were innocent. I want you to know that Druce did desert my sister, the sister I loved, and swore to avenge, but I've forgiven him now, as I hope myself to be forgiven."

She had been his wife then, after all! It was a

relief to feel that she would still be able to look other people in the face without flinching!

She picked up the letters, and walked over to the fireplace, where a small fire burned fitfully. She tossed the letters one by one into its heart, and stared fixedly at the rising flames.

"My life has been one long, bitter mistake! I see it all now. Wantonly I threw away the love of a good man. Another I married for what I believed was love. I lost even its shell! I have lost friends—my children—all!"

Tears fell down her white cheeks, and still she stood there gazing into the fire as if hypnotized.

All at once, she began to tremble. Then she fell upon her knees, and asked God's help to make her see and to tread the right way!

THE END

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